

Bibliophile Princess: Volume 2

Yui

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Bibliophile Princess 2



Author: Yui
Illustrator: Satsuki Sheena

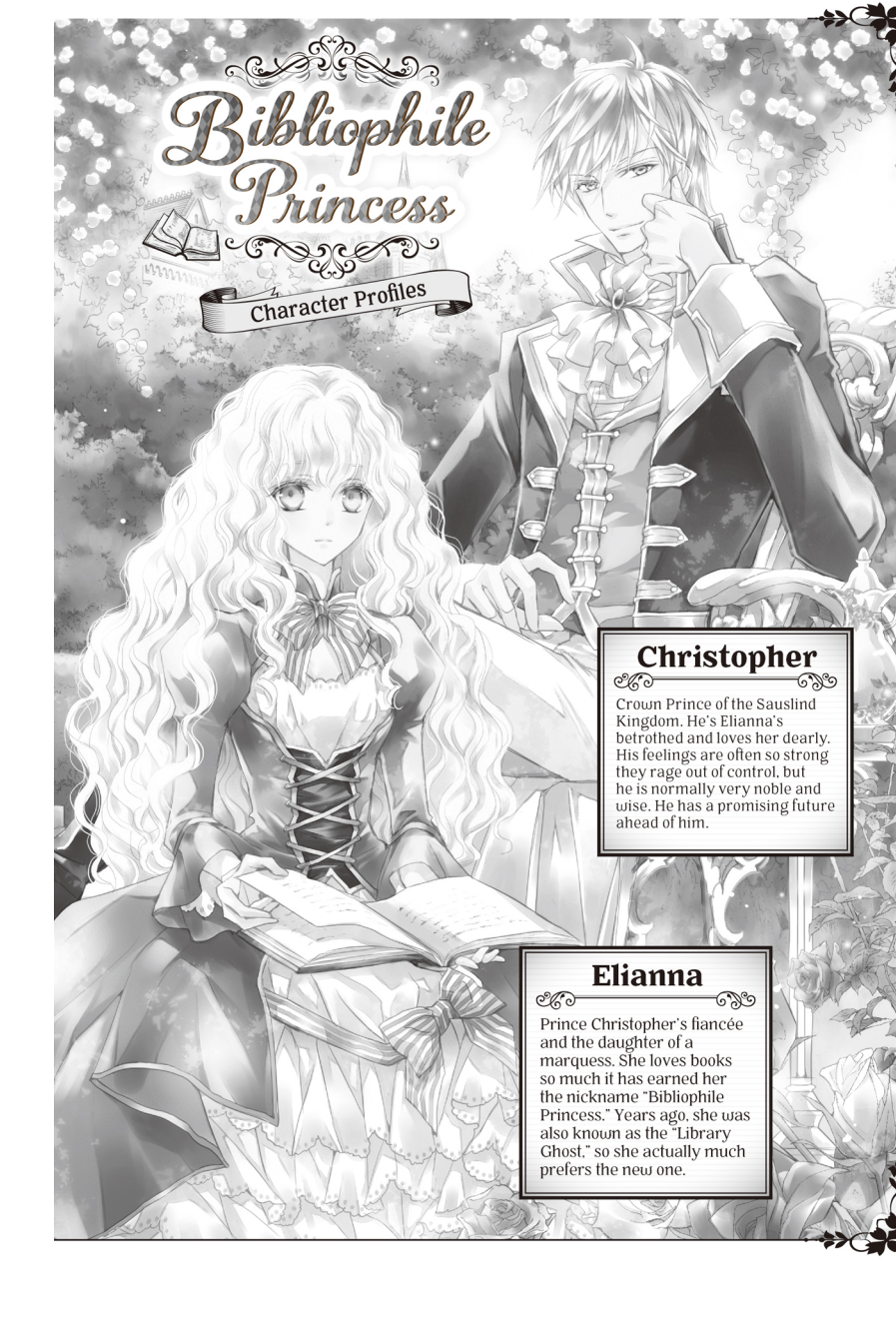
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Bibliophile Princess

Character Profiles

Christopher

Crown Prince of the Sauslind Kingdom. He's Elianna's betrothed and loves her dearly. His feelings are often so strong they rage out of control, but he is normally very noble and wise. He has a promising future ahead of him.

Elianna

Prince Christopher's fiancée and the daughter of a marquess. She loves books so much it has earned her the nickname "Bibliophile Princess." Years ago, she was also known as the "Library Ghost," so she actually much prefers the new one.



Alexei

Heir to an earldom and the prince's reliable right-hand man. He is equally frigid toward any women who approach, which has earned him the epithet, "Ice Scion."



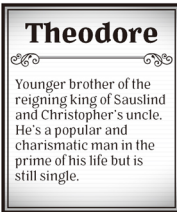
Glen

Part of the prince's inner circle. He's a knight in the imperial guard as well as the prince's bodyguard. Often finds himself the victim of the prince's misdirected frustration and anger.



Alan

Master court musician that serves the prince. Per His Highness's orders, he is secretly shadowing Elianna for her protection.



Theodore

Younger brother of the reigning king of Sauslind and Christopher's uncle. He's a popular and charismatic man in the prime of his life but is still single.



Therese

Alexei's little sister and Elianna's friend. She's already married and deeply in love with her husband.

Series Dictionary

Bernstein Family

A line famous for its generations of book lovers. Because of their lack of interest in political power, they are generally regarded as a weaker house, but they are secretly referred to as "Sauslind's Brain." A very important family. When they last appeared out in the open and assisted during a previous king's reign, the country flourished.

Maldura

A neighboring country of Sauslind. Known as a war-mongering state.

Miseral Dukedom

An ally to the southwest of Sauslind. Known as a maritime nation.

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Arc 1: The Flower Protector

Prologue

Something drifted lightly through the air.

A bleak palette colored the world around her; it was a desolate winter scene, with heavy clouds blotting out the sky above, dropping flakes that swayed as they fell. Yet strangely, she felt comforted by the sight. She pressed a hand against her hair to tamp it down as the wind buffeted her. It was almost like watching small white petals dancing on air, and before she knew it, her stiff lips had softened into a smile.

Her breath came out in visible puffs that soon vanished. She'd made a request to visit the land she loved, to tread upon it—see it one last time so that she might burn the image of it into her mind before she bid it farewell.

She could never return here again, not for the rest of her life, most likely. By her own actions, she had triggered her “death,” one brought by the very hands of the people she loved. Even so, even with all of that...the sight of the dancing snow brought feelings of nostalgia.

She had no regrets. Not even if it meant she could never step foot on this land again, not even if it meant her name was tainted and she lost her noble status. The landscape of this place she so loved was carved into the back of her eyelids, such that she would never forget.

“Ladybird...” The feelings she had kept hidden in her heart manifested themselves in that softly spoken word. She hoped what that name represented would continue to be a cornerstone, even after she was long dead and gone. As she prayed, she glanced up at the sky. The clouds scattered cold, white petals.

Chapter 1: An Autumn Sendoff

The ordinarily green land around him was painted in a colorful array of autumn hues. He felt the sun on his skin, bringing a prosperous crop harvest, and his thoughts wandered to the peace reigning over this land.

Located in a key position just west of Sauslind Kingdom's capital of Saoura was the Eidel Domain. It was a land rich with history, where remnants of a fortress from the time of Sauslind's famous Hero King still endured.

There was something almost feral about the man's black eyes as he narrowed them. "...So this is the place that killed 'her.'" His voice was thick with an emotion that would've been impossible for anyone else to read, and his disquieting word choice made the air around him heavy with tension.

The man continued to mumble, seeming almost amused. He wore a bold smile on his face that looked both boyishly innocent and vicious at the same time. "Elianna Bernstein... Let's see if you live up to my expectations...or not."

If any onlookers had been present to hear those words or to witness his sharp gaze and cruel smile, then they surely would have trembled in fear as they wondered... Just what would he do to this person if they weren't able to live up to his expectations?

His words were swept away by the wind, and an unseen shadow fell over the land of Eidel as it began to bustle with activity, preparing to host an event coinciding with the autumn harvest festival.

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There was a restless energy permeating the palace of Sauslind that day. The halls, which normally maintained an aura of refinement and rigidity, now echoed with the hurried footsteps of one Elianna Bernstein—in other words, me. Such behavior would ordinarily warrant harsh reprimand for a lady. It certainly might wound my reputation, but at the moment I was far too pressed for time to consider that.

"You don't need to rush like that, m'lady. I'm pretty sure he won't leave before you get there anyhow." The man accompanying me with an easygoing tone and leisurely pace was a Bernstein manservant by the name of Jean. He was gangly and in his mid-thirties, and he had

an undependable, sullen air about him. The two of us had been well-acquainted for years, so he spoke to me with obvious familiarity.

I was so focused on hastening my steps that I didn't have the time to spare on a response, so instead I fixed him with a reproachful glare.

Jean didn't even show a hint of remorse toward me, despite the fact that I was the noble daughter of his employer. In fact, he responded to my silent protest with a mere shrug. "I told you when it was time, just like I was supposed to. The other staff approached you about it too, but you're the one who let our words go in one ear and out the other."

I was at a complete loss for how to defend myself. I expelled a pitiful sigh, which was barely audible through the rest of my huffing and puffing.

Jean heedlessly interjected, "This way will be quicker." Familiar with these passages, he led me down a shorter route. Ever since I began visiting the palace regularly, he started accompanying me at times in place of a maid.

I primarily locked myself away in the royal archives, so perhaps he was more knowledgeable about the layout of the palace than I was. The thought of that brought out the competitive side of me.

As we continued along the path he'd selected, I could see the main gate and a crowd of people gathered in the distance. The imperial guard seemed flustered when they noticed us and began urging us to hurry. As much I appreciated their urgency, I was winded from hurrying here and my mind was too preoccupied feeling relieved and accomplished that we'd actually made it on time.

The air was tense, as if a court lady with a strict sense of etiquette had discovered me and was about to start straightening my clothes while delivering a short sermon. I could feel the exhaustion mounting.

Just then, to my relief, someone cut in. "Eli!" His voice was brilliant, clear as the autumn sky, threatening to suck me in—so charismatic that it was almost as if it were just the two of us here.

The crowd of people naturally split, the other ministers and nobles that were there to bid their farewells now making a path for me. The person waiting on the other side made my heart sing louder than it ever had before. Though my feet were leaden with exhaustion now that we'd finally arrived, they naturally hastened toward him. As I rushed forward, my breathing ragged, he spread his arms wide open as if this were some kind of reunion scene in a stage play.

This man was the heir to Sauslind's throne, Crown Prince Christopher. He was both great and wise, a young royal with a promising future ahead of him. The prince had dazzling blond hair, sky blue eyes, handsome features, a fit physique, and an impressive presence. He had quite the kingly disposition for his age, and Sauslind

was proud to call him their future ruler.

I flashed him a smile just as broad as the one he'd given me and said, "I'm here, Your Highness." Keenly aware of what ladies' social etiquette demanded, I came to a hard stop just a few steps short of his outstretched arms.

"...Eli." Our hero was visibly disappointed, dropping both his hands and his shoulders.

I blinked. Had I done something inappropriate?

The man before me certainly had an appearance and a presence about him that warranted the label "hero," but this was a public place. Not to mention it would tilt a few heads in confusion if anyone were to refer to me as a "heroine."

As I stood there, my breathing still uneven, the blond-haired, blue-eyed prince recomposed himself and let out a sigh. He reached out a soothing hand, brushing his fingers through the fluffy locks of my hair. His vivid blue eyes shone with affection, gleaming mischievously.

"Since my fiancée refused to appear, I was about to call off the whole public affair. Were you really that loathe to see me off?" His words and gaze seemed to tease me, causing my cheeks to heat up.

I, Elianna Bernstein, had been blessed with an engagement to the crown prince, otherwise nicknamed the handsome prince. I was neither the powerful daughter of some great noble nor a jaw-dropping beauty. As I had been told, the reason for my selection was partly out of political convenience. My family was known for being a long line of book lovers who would rather bury themselves in a tome than engage in political infighting for power or fame. Therefore, by selecting me, there would be little effect on the political climate at court.

Prince Christopher had taken that into account as he searched for a fake fiancée. When we first met, he had flashed that dazzling smile at me and said, "Lady Elianna, you need only stay by my side and read your books."

Others would consider me eccentric; I already hailed from a family with an affinity for literature, but my own love of tomes was so extreme that it earned me the nickname "Bibliophile Princess."

My appearance mirrored that of my late mother's, from the faint hue of my fluffy hair to the ashen gray of my eyes. That bleak coloration and my generally stiff facial expressions had also earned me another shameful epithet—"Library Ghost." But I also held a new title in the form of "the Crown Prince's betrothed."

From the time of our engagement, I spent years believing myself his bride-to-be in name only. At least that's what I thought, until the beginning of this spring when another noble lady appeared who was

rumored to be in a relationship with Prince Christopher. I actually witnessed a scene in which it appeared the two were maintaining a secret relationship. This convinced me that the woman he truly loved had at last appeared. I mentally prepared myself for the dissolution of our engagement only to be taken aback by how much the whole affair had affected me.

At some point during the four years since I was named his betrothed, I had developed feelings for the prince. By the time I realized my feelings, I was certain it was all too late. Faced with the fact that the love between His Highness and this woman was seemingly mutual, I fell into a pit of despair. One so deep that the name “Bibliophile Princess” no longer seemed apt, for I hadn’t the heart to read any book.

Thanks to the ensuing uproar as things unfolded, I realized it was all a misunderstanding born of my own misinterpretations. In fact, I discovered that the prince had carried feelings for me since we first met nearly ten years ago. An indescribable sense of happiness wrapped itself around me, as if it were all just a dream come true. Our relationship had remained strong since then.

We waited for the fuss to settle before proclaiming it across the kingdom. The official wedding ceremony between Sauslind’s Crown Prince Christopher and his betrothed, Lady Elianna Bernstein, would commence in the spring of next year.

I now knew three things: I was never really a “fake fiancée,” our feelings for each other were mutual, and I would be able to stay at his side for a long time to come. I felt like I was floating on air. Yet this was also why I’d felt an intense loneliness ever since it was decided that the prince would have to leave the kingdom for a while on official business.

I stiffened, growing pale as I recalled the reason for my tardiness. As the Bibliophile Princess, it wasn’t unusual for me to coop myself up in the royal archives. Today I’d had a clear objective for doing so, but my sense of time lapsed as I grew engrossed in books, ultimately causing me to be late for the prince’s sendoff. This certainly was an error unbecoming of the prince’s betrothed.

“Your Highness, um...”

His blue eyes regarded me mischievously, his fingers intent on memorizing the texture of my hair. The prince seemed too impatient to wait for my reply, his handsome lips parting. “All you have to say is one thing: ‘Don’t go.’ Then I can just have Alex or my uncle attend this foreign ceremony in my stead.”

If I wasn’t mistaken, he was basically trying to say he would push his responsibilities off on someone else.

I blinked and replied evenly, “No, that won’t do, Your Highness.”

Ever since our official engagement was announced, His Highness has been unreserved in his affections for me out in public. I was happy and knew it was nothing to be embarrassed over, but I did wish he’d refrain from making comments about ignoring his royal obligations. Even if they were said in jest, they were still inappropriate given his status.

A sorrowful gaze clouded his clear blue eyes as he gave me his usual smile. “I can barely stand the thought of how lonely I will be without you for half a month. I’m sure I’ll spend every night dreaming of you... But what about you?”

Startled, I looked up. The strength of his gaze almost seemed to root me in place, causing my heart to hammer in my chest. I felt exactly the same. I wanted just as much to be by His Highness’s side. Of course I did, especially now that I knew our feelings were shared. It was all the more reason to feel melancholy at our separation. I was also concerned about his safety on the road.

Among the countries on the Ars Continent, Sauslind was relatively stable and wealthy, boasting high profits in exports. Still, the kingdom wasn’t entirely absent of crime, and not everywhere was entirely safe. This was especially true when it came to the crown prince. I hardly need to mention that such a social position made him an easy political target.

The place the prince was traveling to was a friendly nation to the southwest of us called Miseral Dukedom. The political climate at the moment was calm, so everyone agreed that there was no real threat to the prince’s well-being, but no one could know for sure that nothing would happen during his travels. It wasn’t as though I didn’t trust those in the imperial guard to keep His Highness safe, but my trust in them and my concern for the prince’s safety were separate issues. Which was precisely why I had cooped myself up in the royal archives to do some digging, seeking a method with which to protect the prince.

“Your Highness...” My hands moved unbidden, latching onto the prince’s traveling attire. I was at a loss, unsure if I should convey how lonely I felt. It was true I didn’t want him to go, but we couldn’t cancel a pre-planned diplomatic trip based on personal feelings. Caught between obligation and my own heart, I finally let slip what it was I had been researching. “...A doll with human hair or letters written in blood with a quill pen. Which would be more effective?”

“...Excuse me?” He used the same expression I often used in my head when I heard things that took me off guard.

Nonetheless, I pressed closer to him, growing more serious over the matter I had been turning over in my head for a while now. “It’s to

protect you during your travels. Lady Therese suggested a handmade Fita bracelet. But you see, I...well, I'm not terribly dexterous with my fingers..."

Fita bracelets were handcrafted accessories made by weaving dozens of threads together to create a bracelet which one could then make a wish on before wearing themselves or gifting to someone else. It was an especially popular handicraft among women, who would pour their hearts into making it and pray for the safety of someone about to embark on a long journey.

My friend, Lady Therese, had taught me the basics of the craft. I had continued challenging myself to create the bracelet ever since the prince's trip was announced, but alas. For some reason, all my attempts ended in what looked more akin to a dried out earthworm than a proper accessory. Lady Therese had fallen silent after seeing it, only to later suggest, "Maybe we should try something else."

Lady Therese had gotten married three years ago to an older earl operating a trading business. Since she was accustomed to often being left home alone as a result, I had looked to her for advice. She was knowledgeable in regards to love charms and fortune-telling. Thus, she had been a fountain of wisdom for me ever since I realized my feelings for the prince. It was her teachings that had launched my research into charms. The subject turned out to be far more intriguing than I had initially anticipated, one with a history to it, and so, naturally, I was captivated.

As I probed into the field, I discovered that there were two methods said to be the most effective. However, using two charms at the same time would weaken their effect, so I'd been puzzling over which one I should choose.

"The doll will require that I collect a small sample of Your Highness's hair. The other will require that I write your name repeatedly with my own blood as ink. If I take gentle care of the doll, you will be kept safe. If I use the quill pen, my feelings should reach the heavens, granting my wish. Personally, I find the pen route to be the most practical—"

The prince's hand landed on his forehead as if he'd suddenly gotten dizzy. "...Eli," he muttered, voice strained with sorrow, almost sounding resigned somehow. "Part of me wants to ask but part of me doesn't want to know..." Finally he resolved himself and said, "Just out of curiosity, since those pens wear out fairly quickly, would it last through daily use?"

"No, you must only use that pen for the purposes of your wish. In other words, repeatedly writing the name of the person you care about over and over again." I felt a bit embarrassed admitting as much in front of him and lowered my eyes.

The air around us seemed frozen solid, silence settling until someone dared whisper, "...Isn't that a curse she's talking about?" A few unable to contain themselves let snorts of laughter spill out. When I glanced in the direction of the noise, I saw some familiar faces among those gathered.

The one sniggering was the prince's uncle and younger brother of the king, Prince Theodore. His hair was a deep gold, his eyes ultramarine. He always spoke in a low, composed voice, a hint of teasing filtering in. Prince Theodore had a captivating maturity about him as well that made him popular with the ladies. "I knew you were peeking through the section on incantations. So that's what this was all about."

Prince Theodore was the curator of the royal archives. Considering how the archives were almost like a second home to me, the two of us often engaged each other in book discussions. Although Prince Christopher was technically his nephew, the age gap between Prince Theodore and the king was such that he actually had a close relationship with His Highness.

A disquieting hue colored the prince's blue eyes as he responded, "Explain to me, Uncle, why do I get the feeling you watched her from the shadows of the bookshelves, muffling your own laughter as you gleefully anticipated exactly how this would unfold?"

"You have an active imagination, Your Highness. Eli's boundless creativity is far beyond the likes of someone as uninspired as myself to anticipate." After he spoke, Prince Theodore turned his head away to hide his lips from view as he mumbled, "I could have never imagined this was why she was doing it..." I could see his shoulders tremble with laughter.

The prince's brows rose sharply.

A cool voice broke out from beside Prince Theodore, accompanied by a sigh. "We are pressed for time, so please limit the inane banter... Truly, I suspected you and Therese were up to something, but it never occurred to me this was what you were piddling away your time on."

I flinched at his insinuated reproach.

Now that an official date for our marriage had been determined, most likely I would be subjected to the princess training that the prince had previously used his authority to weasel me out of. The Bibliophile Princess's days would certainly be packed full from here on out. No longer would I be able to afford time for such trivial matters—at least, that was the tone of the man's silent rebuke, which naturally caused me to shrink back.

The man who'd mercilessly reprimanded me was Lord Alexei Strasser, a dark-haired youth with a clever air about him and one of the prince's inner circle. He had a handsome if not aloof face with

unique, icy blue eyes. He was the eldest son of one of the most prominent earldoms in the country, as well as the prince's cousin, and the older brother of the friend I had consulted in this matter, Lady Therese. His unbending, cold demeanor had earned him the nickname Ice Scion.

Suddenly a warm voice cut in. "Well, Lady Elianna could have expressed interest in something far worse. Granted, the direction of her intentions was a little backwards, but at least the prince will be her only victim."

The man who spoke so frankly and lightheartedly was another of the prince's inner circle as well as his bodyguard, a ginger-haired knight by the name of Lord Glen Eisenach. Since he was, of course, accompanying the prince on this trip, he was wearing travel attire rather than his usual guard armor.

As he amiably tried to move the conversation forward by saying, "Well then, I suppose it's about time..." I could feel a cold presence nearby.

"Oh?" hummed a low voice. "All right, Glen. Why don't we give some of your hair to *every* single lady who must be worried for your safety, so they can create some of those dolls. Though I loathe to have someone in my employ looking as disheveled as you certainly will once you're done. In which case..." The prince's gaze flitted between the short sword at his side and Lord Glen's head of fiery red hair.

The knight instantly paled, held his arms defensively over his head, as if ready to defend his hair to the last, and backed away. Since we were out in public, he elected to whisper his response, but I could still hear him clearly. "Knock it off already, don't take your frustrations out on me by threatening me with baldness."

Lord Theodore crossed his arms over his chest, a brow quirked. "You must be confident that there are enough ladies out there that you would become bald from giving them your hair. That's a bit irritating to hear. Glen, rather than offer up your hair for a cursed doll...pardon, a doll to pray for a person's well-being, perhaps you should offer up all of your hair instead as a show of sincerity and in apology for all the women you've made cry up until now."

"Why has the topic suddenly changed to me becoming bald?!"

Beside him, Lord Alexei breathed a heavy sigh, as if he was struggling with a migraine. I blinked, not entirely sure how what I said had derailed the discussion this far.

His Highness abruptly reached his hand out, grabbing me by the waist and pulling me the remaining three steps that had been left between us. Then his blue eyes peered down into mine. "Eli." My heart sang at how close we were—the same distance we maintained when we danced together. He gently grasped my hand, which had

been clutching at his clothing, and pressed it against his cheek.

“...Ah!” For a moment, I found myself unable to breathe. I could feel his body heat under my palm, feel how different the texture of his skin was from my own. My thoughts seemed to blank as my face flushed.

He nuzzled my hand, his eyes soft as he gazed back at me. “Were you worried about me?”

I could feel the heat on my cheeks. The quickening of my pulse had left me more short of breath than I had been when I was rushing to get here a few moments prior. I couldn’t bring myself to answer him immediately.

The prince chuckled lightly. He squeezed my hand, as if to remember the feel of it in his and to remind me of the warmth of his touch.

Suddenly, amid the intense drumming of my heart, I could feel something oppressive tighten in my chest. After we said our goodbyes, I wouldn’t be able to see him again for half a month. The loneliness of that realization weighed heavily upon me, along with a nagging concern about his safety on the road. I was frustrated with myself for not being able to prepare a proper charm in time.

“Your Highness, I will be praying for your well-being as you travel.” I regretted the words as soon as I said them, berating myself inwardly for not finding something more appropriate.

There was a hint of melancholy in his eyes as he smiled back at me. “Yes. Well, I suppose I should’ve known that would be your answer.”

The resignation in his voice as he said that made me restless, and I hastily added, “Uh, um... I-I’ll be sure to do a proper job as your stand-in. I won’t do anything that might damage Your Highness’s good reputation. So...” The true sentiments I wanted to express seemed to recede the more I babbled on.

In just a week after the prince departed, I would have to make my way to the countryside for a separate official event. One that, under ordinary circumstances, would have warranted the prince’s attendance. Since His Highness was otherwise preoccupied, I would be the one attending in his stead.

The prince blinked. “All right,” he said, his smile strained. Then, with a dejected sigh, he pulled my hand away from his face, looking loathe to part with me.

I hesitated, a blush still warming my cheeks. Part of me was relieved, but part of me wanted to lean in closer to him.

“Eli, I’m sure you will finish with your official business before I manage to return home...but as I have said before, don’t push yourself. If anything happens, look to my uncle for guidance—no, on second

thought, he's not dependable. Just try to look to the other people around you for advice. Also, while I know you have a tendency to go off on your own, this is a public outing, so be sure to keep your manservant close. You needn't dance with other men at the evening parties any more than is necessary either. Also, be careful of any gentleman that comes trying to push alcohol onto you. Let's see, what else..."

Ever since plans for my attendance of the event were made, His Highness had recited a lengthy list of "things to be careful of" and repeated it so often that I could recite each item by memory now.

"Your Highness..." Behind me, I could hear Alexei incessantly clearing his throat in an attempt to hasten the prince along, until finally he'd interjected to stop Prince Christopher from continuing his laundry list any further.

The prince only sighed again and mumbled, "You truly are a boor." He continued to regard me just as tenderly as he had before, an affection in his eyes now that was very different from the passion I had felt from him a moment ago. Even his voice as he called my name sounded sweet as sugar. "Elianna, I appreciate your concern, truly, but I couldn't bear seeing you hurt yourself in the process. I forbid you from using that quill pen idea you mentioned or anything else of the sort. Make certain no harm comes to any inch of your body while I am gone—not a single strand of hair. And when I return, I will conduct a thorough examination to make sure nothing has happened."

Pardon...?

His Highness didn't wait for me to form a response. He still had hold of my hand, and he drew my fingertips in for a kiss. His strong gaze seemed to press me to agree, so I nodded. With one last glance and gesture, he caressed my hair and breathed a sigh. Then finally he turned his attention, peering up at our surroundings with clear eyes. "Now, let's be off."

As his hand drifted from mine, the prince was bathed in the attention of everyone gathered. This young crown prince who held the future of Sauslind on his shoulders, radiating confidence and authority, looked as blinding as the sun in my eyes. He naturally captivated my attention just as he did everyone else's. I found myself pressed along with the crowd, which had begun moving the moment the prince spoke.

Glen, whose face looked gaunt even before the announcement of their departure, gave orders to his men. In response to the calls of the senior statesmen, the prince made his way to the carriage where the ambassador was waiting to accompany them to the Miseral Dukedom.

I watched along with everyone else as they prepared to leave, until suddenly I felt something indescribable stir up within me,

propelling me forward before I could consider what I was doing. “Your Highness!” My actions lacked the social decorum expected in a public setting, and I was sure I would receive a lecture for it later from the chief court lady. Nonetheless, the prince’s smile weighed on my mind, and I felt a gnawing need to say something, so I rushed after him.

Prince Christopher, whose hand had just reached for the door of the coach, froze. Everyone’s attention turned to me. I jolted with the realization of what I had just done.

“Uh, um...” I wracked my brain searching for the words, but they evaded me. Inwardly, I was shocked at myself for what I had just done.

His Highness, however, blinked a few times before smiling warmly at me. “Eli, would you do me the honor of offering me a trinket?”

“Pardon...?”

His hand reached out toward me, unfastening the ribbon that had been holding back the billowy locks of my hair from both sides. It was nothing fancy or important, simply a pink ribbon one of the maids had used to sweep back my hair. The prince grasped it in his palm, glancing down at the ribbon before tenderly pressing his lips against it. It wasn’t even me he was kissing, yet I could feel my cheeks grow feverishly hot.

“This ribbon will protect me while I’m on the road.”

My chest flooded with embarrassment at his words, though I was still somehow able to return his gaze. “I will be awaiting your return. Please be safe, Your Highness.” I burned the sight of his brilliant smile and clear blue eyes into my mind.

“I will be back, Elianna...my Bibliophile Princess.” His hand brushed my cheek, just as soft as the wind’s caress. The color of my pink ribbon and the autumn sky contrasted with the brilliance of the prince, leaving a vivid impression in my mind.



Chapter 2: The Hunting Festival

The clear, high pitch of a bell echoed across the cloudless autumn sky. In the distance was the sound of birds flapping their wings, joined by the clamor of yapping hunting dogs, cheerful voices, neighing horses, clopping hoofbeats, and clanging equipment. Noble gentlemen and ladies in florid dresses mingled amid this unharmonized cacophony. If the sky above were a canvas, then the nature around us was like an emerald green peppered with the hue of autumn leaves. Combined with the excitement and playful attire of those present, it painted a vivid picture.

It was the beginning of the Sauslind Kingdom's Autumn Hunting Festival.

As I took in the sights of this customary event, I found myself surrounded by a group of women who were wrapped in the same aura of excitement as the men. The most prominent bunch at the gathering, however, was the one consisting of the king's younger brother, Prince Theodore, as well as the imperial guard and various other young noble lords. The noblewomen and ladies that followed after them on horseback were dressed radiantly.

Prince Theodore was not only a member of the royal family, but he was also a charming individual who had yet to establish a relationship with any specific woman. Thus there were many ladies pining after him, his mature age making him all the more appealing in their eyes.

I wasn't particularly blessed with a talent for riding, so I lingered behind with the group of older noblewomen who saw the men off before settling down at some tea tables that had been set up outside. Manservants in uniforms waited on us. The smell of tea wafted through the air, carried by the autumn's breeze, relaxing the mood of those present.

"It's truly unfortunate this time, Lady Elianna," remarked one woman. I lifted my head at the sound of my name to see her hiding her mouth with a folding fan, the only indication of her grin the crinkle of her eyes as she watched me. "We, too, are bereaved that we cannot bear witness to Prince Christopher's hunting prowess."

"My sentiments entirely," agreed another. "I was hoping we might be fortunate enough to watch the prince and Lord Glen vie for the top once more."

As they giggled amongst themselves, I also offered a small smile. “Unfortunately, His Highness had other affairs that required his attendance.”

The land where the Hunting Festival was taking place was Eidel Domain, an area under the direct control of the royal family. The forest here was a prime quality hunting ground, famous for decades. This place had been the origin for hunting festivals across the kingdom. It was only natural for the royal family to participate then, since this was their land.

This time, however, the date for the affair had coincided with the prince’s trip to attend a ceremony in the Miseral Dukedom, resulting in his absence. The queen had personal affairs back home that required her attention and couldn’t participate either. Those close to the throne couldn’t leave the capital unattended, so His Majesty decided that his younger brother, Prince Theodore, and the prince’s betrothed (me) would attend as proxies.

If you took a straight path down the highway from our capital to the Miseral Dukedom, it would take only eight days to arrive. That said, there wasn’t a single regional lord in the country who would forsake offering hospitality to the crown prince as he passed through. They were trying to keep the trip as brief as possible, but even with all haste, the prince and his entourage wouldn’t reach their destination until at least tomorrow or the following day.

As I wondered to myself where exactly he was at, I found my memories wandering to the events surrounding his departure. I could feel the heat rush to my cheeks and lowered my eyes.

The other women regarded me adoringly, smiling. “My, my, Lady Elianna, you certainly are a well-mannered young lady.”

“True indeed, but you could stand to be a bit more demanding. Men enjoy entertaining a lady’s personal requests.”

“Yes,” I replied demurely. Ever since the official date for our marriage next spring had been selected, my aunt and other married noblewomen had been quick to deliver all kinds of advice. I had received some this past summer from Lady Therese as well, one of the few people I considered a friend. Circumstances had prevented her from attending this event, however. Her brother, Lord Alexei, as well as my own older brother and father were also stuck in the capital due to their posts and unable to make an appearance.

There were too few promising gentlemen in attendance at this year’s festival, according to the other noblewomen. The topic of conversation turned into a critical examination as they discussed which lord they thought would come out on top.

“No doubt it will be the imperial guard’s own Lord Sieg that dominates. The Eisenach family is blessed with peerless fighters.”

“What of Baron Owain’s son? I hear he is quite talented when it comes to hunting.”

“Oh goodness, no, that man is talented at a very *different* sort of ‘hunting,’ dear.”

“My, Lady Wyler, you do realize Lady Elianna is with us, don’t you?”

The women chortled behind the shadows of their fans.

“Oh, by the by, Lady Kreis, I noticed there was another gentleman here that I’d never laid eyes upon before. One with black hair and black eyes, with a bit of a feral nature about him, if you will. I heard he’s a guest of your house?”

Their eyes all turned to the wife of Duke Kreis, a man to whom the royal family had entrusted the management of Eidel Domain. She was close to her forties and plump, a gentle disposition about her. She grinned at everyone, mouth unhidden by a fan. “He’s the son of an old friend who married outside of the kingdom. He said he wanted to see the land of his mother’s birthplace, so we invited him along. His name is Irvin Orlanza.”

“No wonder, I thought he had a bit of a foreign scent about him.” The other noblewomen seemed to hold this guest in positive regard.

When next they all asked after the man’s hunting skill, the duke’s wife just smiled back. “Young men have a tendency to be impatient, but if he’s able to maintain his composure, perhaps he will give us a good show. Nonetheless, I am certain the true match this time will be between Prince Theodore, the captain of the imperial guard, Lord Sieg, and Earl Hayden.”

Their eyes turned toward another noble lady present. She had navy blue hair and eyes, an unassuming woman in her late twenties.

“Lady Anna, since Earl Hayden is your father, perhaps you can tell us how you think he will perform during this year’s hunt?”

It was upon hearing that question that I finally realized. Earl Hayden’s territory bordered Maldura to our west, and it was his land that acted as an important safeguard to our kingdom. He was rarely able to make his way to the capital, thus it was my first time meeting him here.

Lady Anna’s facial expression lacked much emotion, and her voice was equally as monotone as she replied, “No different than usual, I suspect.”

Silence fell for a moment, until another noblewoman stepped in to try to smooth the air. “Well, it does seem as though the earl has been busy since last year, no? I hear a major company has begun establishing itself in the region.”

“Truly?” asked another with an anxious sigh.

“Not only does it require a particular technique, but only a limited

number of craftsmen are able to even weave the fabric. Lady Elianna, perhaps you might be able to provide some assistance to them?”

As the subject of the conversation turned to me, I had a guess as to what they were alluding to—the Suiran weave. Last year, I read an old article written by one of the continent’s merchants. I then used an intermediary in hopes of recreating the ancient textile described and, in the process, renewed interest in the Suiran weave which had fallen into disuse in the earl’s territory. It had been a mere sample I obtained out of curiosity, but when my trend-loving aunt and cousins spotted it, they instantly launched it to fame before I could think to do anything.

The weavers in the earl’s territory were subsequently overwhelmed with an unexpected flood of orders, resulting in written protests mixed with despair being sent out. Fortunately, the domain was granted the right to sales and profits. I figured the weave’s popularity would have fallen off by now given that a year had already passed since then, but it maintained its acclaim. Its rarity must have been what continued to attract people.

“I am afraid there is little I could provide, as I am not involved in manufacturing,” I said.

“Lady Elianna may be the one who restored interest in the weave and encouraged its popularity, but those involved in its creation—the people actually from that region—would surely be more informed, I imagine,” said another noblewoman. She smiled at Lady Anna, turning the conversation back toward her. “Lady Anna, I hear that since last year you have had quite the line of men seeking your hand. You certainly seem to have a wide range to choose from, merchants and nobles alike. I hear there are many waiting to see whom you pick before deciding where they should submit their orders for the Suiran weave. Might you share with us whom you are considering?”

I realized two things from this conversation. For a start, as a negative result of the weave’s booming success, there were those around Lady Anna looking to use her to reap the benefits of this growing enterprise. The second was—and I realize my lack of social grace for mentioning this—Lady Anna was yet unmarried despite having surpassed the suitable age.

Even amid all the attention, Lady Anna maintained an air of poise as she replied, “While I am flattered by the proposals, I have no plans of betrothing myself to any man at the moment.”

“Oh my,” the women cooed from behind the shadows of their fans. Some conciliatory, others more critical.

“Don’t be so obstinate. Why not try broadening your perspective a bit more?”

“Indeed. Earl Hayden must be concerned for your future. You are his only daughter, after all.”

The issue had nothing to do with me, but I still sympathized with her. The world wasn't kind to unmarried women. This was all the more true in high society, where those of appropriate age that remained unwed were treated with undue suspicion, as if they were somehow deficient. If I hadn't been betrothed to Prince Christopher, I was sure I would be in the exact same position as Lady Anna found herself in.

I felt some personal responsibility in the matter, given I had contributed to the rise of the Suiran weave's popularity. However, before I could think of a different topic to launch into, Lady Kreis's lively voice redirected the conversation back my way. "The Suiran weave is an ancient technique passed down through the Edea Domain, but I hear the materials used in it actually come from Maldura. Do you have intermediaries working in that country as well?"

The other ladies knit their brows from behind their fans.

Maldura was our neighbor to the northwest, famous for being a "warmongering" country with a long history of numerous conflicts with Sauslind. Last year, we were able to predict an impending cold wave based on an old book I read. If historical precedent was anything to go by, it could mean war for us. Thus, we elected to send them aid, suggesting we avoid any such bloodshed. The success of said proposal was courtesy of the support of Prince Christopher and his allies. My name had spread among the people of Sauslind as I was credited both for avoiding war with Maldura and for restoring the Suiran weave. I could tell, given the attitude of the noblewomen present, that the people still maintained an unfavorable view of the Maldurans.

I mulled over her question a bit before I responded. "It would have been difficult to restore the Suiran weave to exactly what it had been in the past. I didn't have any intermediaries in Maldura either, and the skills of our craftsmen and the supplies have also changed from how they once were. Thus, I had them produce this weave using raw materials created here in Sauslind. The same kind used in the dresses we are wearing right now."

One of the women nodded vigorously in agreement. "I wouldn't want to slip my arms through the fabric of any outfit made with Malduran materials. Anything coming out of an uncivilized country like that would be appalling quality, I guarantee."

I tilted my head slightly. "Not at all. Simply, their threads are not circulated very widely, thus making them exceptionally rare. Most recently, in Jean Tucker's *Moon Lovers* romance series, there appears a 'moonlight fabric.' Based on an account I read by one of the continent's merchants long ago, I believe this may be referring to an actual piece that was woven with Malduran materials."

"Goodness," the noblewomen expressed in surprise.

“You mean to say that it actually existed?”

Their eyes lit up with wonder at the prospect that this item, which had appeared in a popular women’s romance story, might not be fictional after all.

I recoiled, stunned as they sank their teeth right in as if this news were actually a piece of juicy meat. The book in question was one I had read based on a recommendation by my aunt and one of my friends, but the only part of it I could recall was the article from the textile. My hesitant answer seemed rather anticlimactic for how invested the ladies all were. “I haven’t thoroughly investigated the matter, I admit...but there was a similar excerpt in a local history tome as well, I believe...”

Another voice chimed in to agree, one I hadn’t expected. Lady Anna had been quiet throughout the whole course of the conversation until that point. “Yes, Lady Elianna is correct, there is such an excerpt, from a local history text on the Edea Domain. It was written that, long ago, fabric was woven together from threads brought in from Maldura. Ones said to glimmer with the moon’s light. Though it was also said that technique fell out of use during one of the wars.”

“Oh dear,” the women said, their eyes still glittering as they exchanged glances.

Lady Kreis cheerfully steered the conversation back. “That certainly is incredible. I wonder if the Suiran weave might not be all the more fantastic if we were able to get our hands on such materials.”

Even the noblewoman who had expressed disdain for Maldura before now seemed invested in the conversation. There was an air about the discussion that seemed to suggest Lady Anna’s domain would be even more inundated than before with orders, but our talks were abruptly interrupted when a fuss broke out from the forest. Soldiers moved in a flurry, while the manservants and maids waiting nearby displayed a sense of confusion.

I wondered what could have happened.

As we watched, we saw Prince Theodore and his companions emerge from the trees. It seemed awfully early for them to be ending their hunt today, I thought, until I noticed a lady riding along with him on his horse.

The other ladies broke out in murmurs as they left their seats. I followed their example, suspecting that the girl in question must be injured.

In the midst of all the turmoil, my manservant, Jean, scuttled back to me to report. It seemed that one of the ladies was unaccustomed to riding horseback. She’d gotten caught up in the clamor of the hunt and had fallen from her horse.

Prince Theodore happened to be present for it and was

considerate enough to escort her back. He entrusted her to the other ladies present, giving smooth replies to their words of praise and appreciation. Once he was finished, he walked over to where I was standing.

The military officers had a tendency to view Prince Theodore as frail due to his position as curator of the royal archives. However, he had a toned physique and an elegance about him that kept people at a distance—as was appropriate for a member of the royal family—making it difficult for any to look down on him. His hair was a deeper golden shade than that of the prince's. His ultramarine eyes were genuine, yet they had a dignity about them that reminded people to maintain decorum. The aura surrounding him was not that of a young man in his prime but of a mature man whose charm came from years of experience.

“Lady Elianna.” His voice was the same as always, low and pleasant with a hidden playfulness filtering through. Inwardly, I was a bit confused as he took my hand and offered a smile that was mischievous yet also infused with a composure that only a man of his age could possess. “In Chris’s stead, I pledge to make you Eidel’s Princess this year,” he said, planting a kiss on the tips of my fingers. Shrieks and excited cries rang out around us.

There was no special meaning to being Eidel’s Princess. Strictly speaking, it traced its origins back to when the most skilled hunter of the festival would present his special lady with a flower garland. Depending on the year, the woman selected might be the queen or a woman with a close relationship to the victor. No doubt, in Prince Theodore’s case, he hoped his proclamation might curb the rumors of the noblewomen fussing over whether he would select me, being that I was a close relative.

Still, something about it struck me as odd. Prince Theodore rarely took such an attitude in front of anyone outside of Prince Christopher or those familiar with him personally. Even as I continued to puzzle over his actions, Lord Theodore’s expression remained frozen as he whispered, “Eli. You absolutely must not act alone while you’re here.”

Nearby stood Lady Anna as well as a beaming Lady Kreis.

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The room was filled with florid colors, luxurious makeup for women to powder and tidy themselves with, and the redolent scent of perfume. I was too preoccupied with something else, however, to be gazing at my reflection and only lifted my eyes when someone said, “Have you heard, Miss Eli?”

My eyes met with those of the girl in the mirror who was standing behind me, arms crossed. She had soft, chestnut-colored hair and

clever hazel eyes. Her name was Lilia, a girl with a charm and shrewdness about her that only the youngest of three sisters could possess. That made sense, given she was the youngest daughter of the Storrev family, making her my cousin and three years my junior.

“Um...?” I expressed my confusion and tried to tilt my head, only to earn the admonishment of the two panicked maids tending to my hair.

“Please don’t move, my lady.”

“Yes, please. Your hair refuses to cooperate enough as it is.”

“Hey, Sheila, doesn’t this hairstyle make her eyes look a bit cat-like? Perhaps we should lower this a bit—”

“No, this is perfect, Annie. Our lady lacks the necessary air of sovereignty, so giving her a bit of an edge like this will strike just the right balance.”

I couldn’t quite concur with that reasoning. And as the two wrangled my hair from either side, the Elianna in the mirror stared back with eyes that looked glazed over rather than cat-like.

Now that the afternoon hunt was over, an evening party was being held at the Kreis family’s house here in the Eidel Domain. The festival would last for seven days, and during that time it was up to me to attend these events as a proxy for His Highness. The role felt particularly cumbersome given how mingling in high society wasn’t my forte, but there was little other choice. Plus, I had promised the prince I would do a proper job, so I needed to immerse myself in the role and move forward. Thus, I had two household maids attending to me, seeing that I was properly outfitted for the occasion.

My cousin had already finished her preparations. I could now see her reflection in the mirror, letting a snicker slip past her lips. “Little surprise, your household maids know you well, Miss Eli. You know, since I am related to you and you are the betrothed of the prince, that essentially makes me one of your cronies. I so wish I could have the opportunity, just once, to wield that authority and say ‘Hohoho! If you disobey Lady Elianna, your future is forfeit!’”

...Just what villainous noble daughter was she trying to mimic? Not that I should be surprised; she was the daughter of the very same aunt who tried to make me read romance novels to her every time I visited. Inwardly, I was strangely impressed—an exasperated type of impressed, granted.

Her words aside, I did at least understand that my maids were doing their utmost so that the other nobles would have no cause to belittle me in the absence of the prince. I was also determined not to slip up and had been inwardly reviewing the dance steps we had rehearsed just minutes prior.

Jean, my manservant, had acted as my partner, keeping count of

each time I stepped on his foot. Around the fifth time he commented, "...If you've got some kinda grudge against me, please just say it, m'lady." His voice was thick with resentment.

Oh, no, I am quite sure I didn't—well, most likely didn't—harbor such feelings.

"Well, it's fine. It would be asking the impossible to expect you to have such a highly dignified air about you. Indeed, it wouldn't even suit you. So don't worry too much over it, Miss Eli," said Lilia, sounding less like my cousin and more like the chief court lady.

"A younger generation is taking the stage now as younger women make their debut," my cousin continued. "Those that are the same age as you will face difficulty if they're left on the shelf like spoiled goods, which is precisely why they are all eager to land a fitting match and marry off. Yet there are some, among those who have yet to give up on the prince, that are oblivious to what's unfolding around them. Anyway, my generation, which just made its debut into high society, is flying off the shelf like a bargain sale."

I blinked. Lilia had an entirely serious expression on her face, as if she hadn't just compared herself and other noblewomen to discounted produce.

"There are many in my generation not aware of the relationship between you and Prince Christopher. Particularly, there are those who refuse to accept your accomplishments and think they've merely been embellished and exaggerated because you're engaged to the crown prince. Though, well, that is partly your fault for not being more proactively involved in high society."

Since I couldn't move, I nodded with my eyes, conceding her point. This was the price that came from accepting the prince's offer and resigning myself as a bride-to-be in name only for so long.

My earnest response elicited a small laugh from Lilia as she continued, "But you know, there are also those whose ambitions changed after your wedding date was decided. Chief of whom is Lady Sofia."

"Lady Sofia?" I echoed.

Lilia nodded, tapping a finger to her chin in careful thought. "She is quite beautiful, so she's stood out ever since her debut. However, she was always so invested in Prince Christopher that she never gave any other nobleman a second look. I suspect that's why she's been so flustered since the announcement of your wedding date, which was also the reason for her earlier stunt."

My eyelashes fluttered again, earning me an exasperated look from my cousin.

"This afternoon when they were hunting," Lilia explained, "she purposefully strayed from the crowd. She played it off as though she

merely got separated, of course... Still, wandering into the hunting grounds is poor social conduct for a lady. The only reason it didn't cause more of a stir was because Prince Theodore was the one who helped her."

"Oh my," I said, astonished. I never knew there were ladies who would take such bold action to approach men they were interested in. Or perhaps this was a recklessness peculiar to Lilia's generation.

Lilia gave an odd smile. "And yet, Prince Theodore didn't even look her way; he went to you instead and promised you the flower garland. I admit, it was a little satisfying seeing the look on Lady Sofia's face when that happened. Even knowing that we're related, she still showed no compunction in slandering you in front of me. It left such a bad taste in my mouth."

She huffed, the expression on her face showing the immaturity of her youth. I could feel my cheeks dimple, threatening to smile. Lilia must have noticed, for her cheeks turned pink and she grumbled at me, her lips flaring in a pout.

"It's precisely because you don't take these things seriously that people like her get so carried away! Lady Sofia is only obsessed with the prince for his looks. She doesn't know how he really is, and we don't know what she might try to do to you. With Mister Alfred and the others absent, there aren't many people here to keep an eye out for you. So don't fade into the background like a ghost, and pay proper attention—for your own sake!"

Somehow, the intensity of her appeal overwhelmed me, and I found myself obediently nodding. Part of what she said weighed on my mind a bit, but it was true that the only people present from my aunt's family (the Storrev family) were Lilia and her father, Earl Storrev. My aunt and other cousins were busy with other plans and therefore unable to attend. My father and brother Alfred had been appointed to key positions since my engagement, thus keeping them too busy to accompany me as well. Prince Christopher always escorted me to previous events such as evening parties, so it was little wonder why his absence left me feeling particularly lonely. Still, my younger cousin was going out of her way to share concern for me, and since I was older, I couldn't complain.

Once the last of the adjustments were made, the shawl was lifted from my shoulders. I pulled my wits together, smoothed my dress, and turned back to look straight into those hazel irises. "Thank you, Lilia."

Her clever eyes blinked, lips quirking into a grin. Then, with a sigh of both admiration and wonder, she looked me over. "You look wonderful. My mother and sisters have a good eye for this. I did think the light lavender color was a bit lacking in impact, but the specks of darker violet peppered throughout the dress bring it all together.

There's an exquisite balance between the soft shading and the deep hues. It's almost like it brings out the allure and charisma hiding within. The person who crafted this certainly knows you well." She let out a quiet breath, then quickly flashed a mischievous look at me. "Wait, don't tell me... This is actually a gift from Prince Christopher, isn't it?"

"Lilia...!"

Lilia gave a breezy laugh as my cheeks turned red, then she cheerfully added, "I'm only teasing. You really do look like an autumn fairy wearing this though. The hairstyle does show a more mature side of you. I am sure no one will be able to gossip about you being a ghost now."

Considering she was a frequent perpetrator of such ribbing, I was at a loss for how to respond.

Lilia herself looked feminine in her bright green dress, one with a simple, modest finish in such a vibrant color that it would encourage a smile on the face of anyone who beheld it. As the two of us were evaluating one another, someone else chimed in.

"It's nearly time," came the curt voice of our family's head maid. She'd been preoccupied handling guests in a separate room until now. Her name was Selma, and she had long been in our employ. Since my mother's generation, to be exact. She had accompanied me in place of my father, to act as a chaperone.

Her eyes combed over me critically, careful to make sure not even a single strand of hair was out of place. Then she nodded quietly. "You're ready." Annie and Sheila, who had been standing nearby with nervous looks on their faces, instantly dropped their shoulders in relief.

"Your adornment?" said Selma, prompting the two to hurriedly open a small jewelry box. Inside, sitting snug on a velvet stand, was a dazzling gem. When they fastened it around my neck, it felt cold and heavy—oppressive.

As I held my breath, Lilia glanced at my face and smiled. "Hey, Miss Eli, did you know?"

I tilted my head, only to see an impish glint in her eyes.

"That jewel is the same color as the prince's eyes, and since you have worn it so often, for the past four years, sapphire has become a famous symbol of pure love among the nobility. It's also a popular gift among noblemen for women they're interested in."

"Oh..." I blinked in surprise. This was the first I'd ever heard of this.

It was true that the jewel I had been wearing was one Prince Christopher had gifted me shortly after the beginning of our engagement. Back then, I thought such adornments were merely on

loan to me because of my status and I would have to eventually return them. However, now that I had worn this same piece for four whole years, I had grown attached to it. I admit, I would have felt insecure going to tonight's party without it. I could feel the prince's affection for me as I wore it, but I also felt annoyed at myself for how oblivious I had been back then.

Lilia peered into my face with a cheerful expression on her own as she readily proclaimed, "He really does love you, Miss Eli."

Chapter 3: The Darker Side of the Evening Party

We were given the signal and ventured into the venue, the blinding light prompting me to narrow my eyes. I could see Prince Theodore preceding ahead with an adorable young lady at his side, her bright golden hair sleekly pulled back behind her head. I continued behind him, stepping into the dazzling hall that hosted tonight's party. My uncle, Earl Storrev, glided along beside me.

Ordinarily my uncle should have been escorting his own daughter, as she was underage, but since I had neither my father nor brother here with me, he had volunteered in their stead. I had worried over what Lilia would do with no companion, but she was resourceful and calculating enough to snag herself a man (one distantly related *and* single) to act as her date. My concern, it would seem, had been unwarranted.

"Elianna? Smile." My gentle uncle noticed the tension on my face and leaned in to whisper to me, still smiling. He was such a mild-mannered, unassuming man. It was hard to believe he led a household consisting of my aunt and their three rambunctious daughters. I gazed back into his eyes, the same hazel color as Lilia's, and faintly returned his smile.

The way people stared felt like a downpour of small daggers stabbing right into me. As the crown prince's betrothed, people's eyes were always drawn to me each time I went out in public. Their numbers seemed sparser than usual this time. I was sure this was in large part due to His Highness's absence, since he always drew attention. There was another reason this time as well—everyone's curious eyes were focused on Prince Theodore and his young companion.

The woman in question was the very same woman Lilia had spoken about just moments prior, the young daughter of Earl Mills. Her family were distant relatives of Duke Kreis's family, thus making it difficult for Prince Theodore to refuse her out of hand when she approached him earlier that afternoon and requested he accompany her. He'd had no choice but to agree.

Lady Sofia wore a slightly feminine, auburn dress. Her cheeks were blushing proudly as well, giving her more of a haughty impression than an innocent one. Still, I would do well to learn from

her example, given how confidently and unabashedly she conducted herself even with someone like Prince Theodore as her escort.

The party commenced when our sponsors, Duke Kreis and his wife, as well as my uncle and I began dancing. Lady Sophia's foot was apparently still injured from her earlier fall, so out of consideration, Prince Theodore politely guided her off the dance floor. I couldn't help feeling a bit envious of her. Namely because after the first dance with my uncle, I was supplied with a dizzying, never ending stream of other partners in the form of Duke Kreis and other high-ranking noblemen and their unmarried sons.

Normally, after dancing with His Highness, I would only have to dance with a small number of other married men, and it would be over. This time, there was an unusually large number of unmarried men stepping forward. Although I was terrible at memorizing people's faces, I worked frantically to ensure I never danced with the same gentleman twice, while also trying not to stab their feet with my heel as we twirled.

"Lady Elianna, might I request a dance with you as well?"

Just as I was hoping for some respite... I turned back with a smile, only to spot a mischievous expression on a face I knew all too well. "Prince Theodore..."

He gave a chuckle at my surprise and took me by the hand, smoothly leading me into the next dance. "You take your role a bit *too* seriously. If you continue being so dutiful, you'll have a list of men to entertain that's so long even seven days of evening parties won't be enough."

"Still," I began to insist.

"Oh, I admit, it *is* endearing and noble how earnestly you're working in Chris's stead. I would like to tell you not to feel so obligated to humor these other noblemen, but then if you were capable of that you wouldn't be in this predicament." He laughed as he spoke. Then an ill-natured smile crawled onto his lips. "That said, it was interesting to witness. Chris spent four years diligently expelling such pests, but some obstinate ones have continued to cling on. I wonder what kind of expression he'll have on his face when he learns of this later."

I cocked my head to the side, which prompted him to inquire as to what conversations I had been having with those men. I answered honestly. "Most of them spoke about their territories and businesses."

"I see..." he murmured with interest. "So that's what they were after." Then, with a hint of exasperation in his voice, he continued, "All he managed to do was increase the number of men that are after you."

I was left to once again tilt my head in bewilderment as Prince

Theodore flashed me the same fleeting sweet smile that His Highness always did. “Part of your role as his beloved is to take the jealousy that comes with it. I wish you luck, Eli.”

“Prince Theodore...” I spoke his name admonishingly. I was well aware that he was merely ribbing me, but that didn’t stop my cheeks from flushing red.

We passed our dance with pleasant small talk. Once it was over, Prince Theodore smoothly turned down the men waiting to request their turn with me, allowing me to retreat from the dance hall. And as we did...

“Eli, that dress suits you perfectly,” said Prince Theodore. “The shades make you look as enchanting as a wine fairy, enough to intoxicate me.”

Such a level of flattery was impressive, albeit not entirely unexpected given he was Prince Christopher’s uncle. It was a bittersweet reminder of His Highness, and I smiled gently despite myself. “Thank you for saying as much.”

He had a faint grin on his face as well as he delivered me to the waiting Lilia. Then he took his leave, engaged in conversation with the men around him as he went.

My cousin delivered the same lecture (about being too dutiful) that I’d just received moments prior. Once she was done, we made our way toward some seats to have a rest, carefully dodging the men who were trying to cajole us into drinking wine.

“My, my, if it isn’t Lady Lilia.”

The line sounded like something out of a play, prompting me to turn my head back. Three noble ladies stood there to greet us, all the same age as Lilia, two of them following a step behind the third as if they were her lackeys. All of them had their eyes trained on me. The one in the center was the very individual Prince Theodore had escorted to the party—Lady Sofia.

Lilia murmured under her breath so only I could hear, “Oh joy, a walking, talking headache found her way to us.” She quickly smiled and responded to them, “Good evening, Lady Caroline, Lady Cecily, Lady Sophia.”

They replied in kind, still watching me expectantly. Lilia restrained her annoyance and introduced us. The other two were the daughters of a baron and viscount respectively, effectively putting the station of my family above theirs, despite the Bernsteins’ notable lack of authority as a noble house.

We exchanged pleasantries, as was required of noble ladies, and then the viscount’s daughter opened fire—figuratively, of course. “I admit, I had no idea, Lady Elianna. You have such a reputation for rarely mingling amongst the nobility, but it seems you have an affinity

for dance. After all, you took one partner after another, endlessly twirling about with numerous men.”

“Oh dear,” continued the baron’s daughter with a smile. “I nearly mistook you for a noblewoman desperately trying to hunt down a marriage partner.”

“Now, now, Cecily, the other noblewomen might glare at you if they were to overhear,” said Caroline.

“Oh my! How terrifying!” The two exchanged looks and giggled.

Lady Sofia stood at their center, looking poised as she smiled and scolded the two. “That’s quite enough, you two. Lady Elianna is Prince Christopher’s betrothed. With such a title to her name, it is little wonder why she has such a surplus of willing dance partners.”

“Goodness, that certainly is true, but...” Lady Caroline, the viscount’s daughter, furrowed her brows and glanced over at me. “Isn’t that all the more reason why she should refrain from such behavior? I must say, it seems a bit immodest to be entertaining so many men on the dance floor in His Highness’s absence.”

“Precisely. Seeing such disgraceful behavior from the crown prince’s betrothed will only cause people to lose respect... Though, if someone more classy, like Lady Sofia, were his fiancée, then it would be entirely different.” They laughed behind the shadows of their fans, as noblewomen often did.

Lilia could no longer hide her disgust, huffing under her breath, “This is why I loathe people who can’t discern the difference between being sociable and being ‘immodest.’” Their gazes turned sharp at that remark, but Lilia only smiled back. “Miss Eli’s official wedding ceremony has already been planned for next spring. Yet it remains necessary for the rest of us not yet betrothed to work diligently to find an appropriate marriage partner. If the crown princess were to act as an intermediary and introduce us to someone, why, surely a secure future would await. But imagine if we were to mistake our position and aim too high, then we may be the ones receiving the very same comments you just made from the next generation. How foolish would we look then?”

“I won’t simply let that comment pass, Lady Lilia. Are you insinuating that we have mistaken our positions and are aiming too high?”

“Goodness, no,” said Lilia. “I would never imply that, for as devoted as you seem, you hardly have any results to show for it. Nor would I comment about how you never seem to find any dance partners. Nor would I demand to know what your definition of ‘classy’ is despite the fact that the only thing you have the guts for is envying and making enemies out of people who actually have notable achievements. Oh, certainly not, no such thoughts have ever even

crossed my mind.”

“What did you just say?!”

Tension mounted in the air, and I inwardly panicked. I understood Lilia had said all of that in my defense, but it wasn’t good to aggravate the situation. I hastened to change the subject and called over to Lady Sofia. “I heard you wounded your leg. How are you feeling now?”

Lady Sofia’s otherwise adorable features had contorted into a scowl at Lilia’s words. She turned her eyes up at me, only to jerk her chin away as if she’d just remembered the injury. “I am perfectly fine now.”

“Truly? It would be best not to push yourself until you are fully recovered. They say sprains can be chronic, after all. I’ve also heard that, for some people, chilling a wound with horse meat can be more effective than a poultice. Though I certainly don’t think it’s appropriate to take another living creature’s life merely for pain relief.”

Lady Sofia and the others stared at me with their mouths agape. “Horse meat...?”

“Indeed. You use raw horse meat to cool the affected area. According to the author of *An Ancient Collection of Folktales*, Jim Dawn, this was originally a folk remedy passed down in the Pasig Region. Its efficacy has been medically acknowledged as well. There is some component in horse meat that is effective for reducing inflammation. Similarly, there is something called horse oil. As the name implies, it’s oil extracted from the fat of a horse, effective in treating burns. In the Pasig Region, it’s famous for its ability to clear a woman’s skin,” I informed.

“Horse oil...” Lady Sofia and the other women’s faces seemed to stiffen.

I suspected, given their age, they would be interested in beauty trends and routines. Thus, I essentially became a Pasig envoy, relaying to them the refining methods used as well as the clear skin they could obtain from it.

Lady Sofia and the other seemed ill at ease, for in the middle of my explanation, their expression turned sour as they suddenly excused themselves to go to the lounge area.

I wonder if they’re not feeling well?

Lilia, for some reason, had been trembling with stifled laughter from the onset of my horse meat tale. Once Lady Sofia and the others departed, she held a fan over her mouth to try to suppress her cackling.

I felt disquieted with the way things had turned out, but at least for the moment we had smoothed things over. That brought comfort to my heart.

Lilia expressed some interest in the horse oil story. “I have a friend who is concerned about her skin, perhaps I should recommend it to her. But still, horse oil...?” Since she seemed conflicted, I continued my explanation, citing the clear complexions of the Pasig Region’s women as an example. Soon, the sharp ears of the other married noblewomen caught wind of our conversation and they inserted themselves.

Suddenly our conversation became a skin consultation, with women offering such stories as, “Recently, the materials in cosmetics have been rough on my skin... It dries me out so much, I wonder if horse oil might be effective?” Hearing the cases I provided as evidence, the women soon began inquiring about having a request put in for the oil so that they might sample its effects. Said inquiry then led to noblemen joining our conversation as well.

I soon regretted the fact that I had fancied myself some kind of envoy. No, perhaps it was more accurate to say I had misjudged women’s fixation with beauty. Somehow I managed to finish the discussion and extract myself. Lilia had become invested in a conversation with her other friends, so I left her behind to retreat, unaccompanied, from the area.

I escaped the commotion of the evening party, finding respite by a wall near the front of the building. Eager for a breath of night air, I turned my feet toward the balcony, only to be interrupted.

“Young Miss Bernstein.”

A man stopped me. He looked to be in his fifties, with stern facial features, a rugged, brawny build and an unapproachable air about him. His hair, cropped short, was a navy blue, his skin sunkissed. He looked like a man who had weathered some storms in his time. Armor would have suited him better than the evening attire he was currently dressed in.

“An honor to make your acquaintance. I am Lowe Hayden, lord of the Edea Domain. I hope you will forgive my ill-mannered introduction, as I am merely a country noble from the border.”

Earl Hayden, or in other words, Lady Anna’s father. I gave him the obligatory ladylike curtsey expected of noblewomen.

He waited for me to finish before he continued to speak, his tone heavily formal. “I had hoped I would be able to meet you at least once, to relay my gratitude. Your involvement is to thank for the Edea Domain’s rare and recent surge in activity and prosperity. Thus, I would like to extend my thanks.”

“Oh no, you flatter me.” I had an inkling from my earlier conversation with the other noblewomen that afternoon, but it still

felt a bit surreal to me—everyone seemed to think I was responsible for boosting the border region's economy and morale.

His eyes watched me, unmoving. "Pardon me for saying as much, but it was surprising to me that someone enjoying such a life of luxury in the capital—someone in such a magnificent position as the crown prince's betrothed—would turn their attention to the people living in the borderlands. Impudent as it might be, I felt a strong sense of endearment toward you. Alas, I soon realized my admiration was utterly misplaced."

Shocked, I lifted my eyes to meet his. Had I done something that might affect the Edea Domain other than reviving the Suiran weave?

Earl Hayden's gaze was powerful, unbending—to a terrifying degree. "Splendid work, supporting Maldura and curbing the military. Your advice allowed us to subvert danger while restoring tranquility to Maldura and the surrounding nations. At least on the surface."

I swallowed a breath.

He was referring to how my name had spread as the one responsible for avoiding the conflict. If he was suggesting that I was the one who had proposed that we support Maldura through its hardship, keeping the war-loving nation in check by doing so, then he was certainly right. "On the surface" was an accurate assessment too, given that we had only dealt with the most immediate diplomatic problem.

Earl Hayden continued, his tone increasingly severe. "The Edea Domain has been a key location since the founding of Sauslind, an integral cornerstone that prides itself on supporting and protecting the country. However, historically, it's also been on the forefront of numerous wars, with countless invaders desecrating our lands.

"Have you ever considered the feelings of those residing in Edea? The feelings of people possessed by constant fear of a threat posed by the warmongering nation that borders them, a people whose homeland holds a past riddled with occupation and devastation—have you given them any thought?"

His voice, deep and quiet, was filled with strength. "You removed the threat of the Maldurans, and after dodging that conflict, advised the crown to spend money that had originally been intended for military defense on other ventures. Do you have any idea the impact that had on the hearts of the people living in my lands? As the reigning lord of Edea, allow me to give you some counsel. Military defense is a way of deterring a warmongering state from war, but it is also what brings peace of mind to the people living on the front lines. Showing contempt for military defense also threatens peace and order for your own citizens. Please keep that in mind."

I gulped again. He was right; the way we dealt with the

Malduran's cold wave crisis had resulted in a surplus of unused money that was intended for military defense. When asked for my opinion on where best to allot that money, I had suggested updating medical resources in a different region. Granted, in the very process of advocating against possible conflict with the Maldurans, I had also said we should find a different way to deal with them rather than strengthening our military. If someone claimed I was showing contempt for the importance of our military, there was little I could say in my defense.

Earl Hayden let out a small sigh. His eyes seemed to soften a little as they watched me. Perhaps he was feeling sympathetic, given I was even younger than his own daughter. "I realize this isn't something I should be saying to you alone. Your father has been the one cutting the military budget year by year, using the funds to maintain highways in the countryside and ensure the safety of merchants traveling there. It makes sense. Thieving was highly concentrated in those regions, but thanks to his efforts, all who have access to those roads—travelers and people from the mountain and valley villages alike—have been more lively. This served to smooth the distribution of goods, enriching the country. A fine example." He sounded complimentary, but there was a dose of sarcasm infused in his tone as well.

Nobles living in the capital never lacked for material things. Nor had they ever had their safety threatened. Indeed, I was blessed with abundance there, surrounded by my beloved books. But just who was it that maintained that sense of security? It was precisely because Edea had single-handedly shielded those of us living in the capital from danger that we were able to enjoy the lives we had. At least, that was the insinuation.

Earl Hayden's eyes bore into me. His sharp tongue quieted slightly. "I am fully aware that the fairer sex has an aversion to war, but your position and words have the power to move a nation. I would like you to keep that in mind. Your idealistic proposals sound like nothing more than the fantastical dreams of a young lady who knows little of the world outside her books. I say all this, fully aware of how disrespectful I must sound, but I do hope you will take my words to heart."

"...All right." It was all I could do just to meet his eyes and squeeze out those two words. His words had made me realize that there were things I couldn't understand merely by reading books. Namely, the pain of a people born in a land with a storied past, one trampled by war. But I could also see Earl Hayden's fierce determination to try to protect those same people.

The Lord of Edea gave a formal head bow before spinning around

on his heel. I watched him leave before venturing out onto the balcony, where I savored the feel of the night's air on my cheeks. A sigh spilled past my lips as my spirits turned dour. I suddenly felt helpless, as if the solid ground beneath me was now precarious, unstable.

Up until this point, I had made my own analyses based on the knowledge I had gained from books, then used those thoughts to guide whatever statements I made. Perhaps from the perspective of people like Earl Hayden—people who walked through life bearing the weight of history on their shoulders—my thoughts were nothing short of fanciful ideals with no basis in reality. By giving that advice, had I really ignored the safety of the people in Edea, effectively trampling on the feelings of the people living there?

I clutched at my chest, grasping a fistful of fabric in my hand. Never before had I felt so little confidence in myself. Never before had I felt so alone. I'd received scathing criticism from the more aggressive wing of the military back when the whole episode with Maldura originally happened, but thankfully His Highness had been beside me that whole time.

I truly was just a big-headed Bibliophile Princess. There was a world out there I couldn't understand just by reading. I'd learned that lesson before. Or rather, I *should* have learned it before. I never dreamed this was how I would realize just how much the prince had covered for me.

“...”

His name threatened to slip past my lips, but if I dared whisper it, I knew I'd only miss him more. Somehow I managed to swallow it back. There had been many days in the past where the two of us couldn't meet. The fact that I only wanted to cling to him at times like this made me feel like nothing more than a spoiled child. Even so, there was no stopping the increasingly intense sense of longing I had for the prince.

Just then, I heard a snicker from behind me. I flipped around, surprised. There was a young man standing there, half bathed in the light trickling out of the building. He watched me, a mocking gleam in his eyes.



This was my first time ever seeing this gentleman. He had slightly wavy black hair and a feral glint in his pitch black eyes. There was a keen, nimble air about him, and he had an agile build as well. A scent, almost one foreign in nature, wafted from him.

He slowly strode forward, those black irises observing me from up close. "Hey, you. Are you Lady Elianna Bernstein?" His tone was vulgar, running contrary to his noble attire.

I stood there at a loss, and his gaze swept over me. He scrutinized me from head to toe, wearing a small smile on his face as he did so. I might be dull-witted, but even I recognized his derision.

"So the betrothed of Sauslind's prince is a young noble lady that looks like a porcelain doll, eh? Not what I expected."

"Pardon," I began, suspicious, "but who might you be?"

His lips tugged upward in a facetious grin. "Irvin Orlanza. Duke Kreis and his wife invited me. I was hoping to meet you, Lady Elianna."

So this was who they were talking about this afternoon. I had gained a lot of attention, being the crown prince's fiancée. Still, this was the first time I had ever met someone whose gaze was so disrespectful.

After a brief pause, I asked, "Is there something you require of me?"

"Nah, just found it surprising." I furrowed my brow, and the mocking in his voice became more apparent. "You're about to break down in tears because of the harsh things the earl said to you, right? Well, they *do* say that even grown men are reduced to quivering children in front of the Guardian of the Border. But to see Sauslind's Brain reduced to tears, unable to say anything in her defense? Not what I had hoped."

His remarks were quite presumptuous. Besides, I wasn't at the brink of tears. I was just...feeling a little downtrodden. Though more than anything, I felt even more wary of him than I had before. Sauslind's Brain—His Highness had informed me before that only a select few outside of the royal family even knew of my house's hidden name. It was a bit of an exaggerated title, bestowed upon us because the Bernsteins were said to have brought a prosperous reign to the monarchs they served in the past. A confusing epithet from my family's perspective, given we were merely a lineage of book-lovers.

The man who'd spoken that name and heightened my suspicion seemed to notice the change in my eyes. His mocking lips opened to say something more, but a new presence cut him off.

"Lady Elianna." A man with black hair appeared, wearing one of the Kreis family's servant uniforms. When I glanced back, I saw that

his head was bowed toward me as he remarked, "Lady Kreis is looking for you. Please, this way."

The unbending tone of his voice left me with no choice but to nod my head. I took a small glimpse over at Lord Irvin, whose black eyes danced with amusement. There was determination there, as if he'd locked onto his target. That alone was enough to make me suspect that he had an ulterior motive for coming to meet me.

Chapter 4: The Ghost of Eidel

The third day was, unfortunately, overcast.

Here in the Eidel Domain, the Kreis family's mansion had a storied past; both it and the old castle nearby were remnants of a fortress from the Age of the Hero King. The castle, however, wasn't currently in use, so guests were staying instead at a residence built on the grounds a few decades prior.

Given the weather, only a few of the men had ventured out for hunting. The imperial guard and Earl Hayden had left as well, but the halls of the manor were still filled with clusters of people engaged in lighthearted chatter. It was almost as though the center for social gatherings had been temporarily relocated from the capital to here.

I found myself on the receiving end of numerous tea party invitations, ones I felt obligated to accept given I was acting as the prince's proxy. Yet, in a rare display, the head maid shooed me out with my manservant, saying, "Leave the rest to us, we will see to it. You just go and have yourself a bit of a breather, my lady." Selma was known for being strict, so this unusual display of kindness left me blinking my eyes quizzically.

The Kreis family's library had caught my eye, so I decided to use this as an opportunity to visit. The existence of books, their smell, the knowledge trapped in tranquil sleep upon their pages, and the living stories between their covers—I found it all simultaneously soothing and yet exciting.

I immersed myself in reading for a while, only to discover that Jean had wandered off somewhere in the meantime, yawning to himself. Then my eyes suddenly landed on a time-worn tome. When I took it in my hands, I soon realized the binding was so damaged it was on the verge of falling apart. This book, badly in need of repairs, was about embroidery.

Softly, I flipped open the cover. A name was written inside in graceful, lady-like penmanship: Ladybird Sylvia. I wondered if this was the owner of the tome, though I was fairly certain there was no one in the Kreis family with such a name. Regardless, damaged books were no different from an injured patient in my eyes. I cradled it against my chest and doubled back the way I had come, only to hear an echo of voices coming from somewhere.

"Don't play games with me."

My feet froze at the crude words. Gingerly, I peeked through the gaps of the bookshelves. I could see a man, boldly pressing in on Lady Anna.

“Not a bad offer, is it? All those merchants clamoring around the Suiran weave are merely opportunists. Once the trend wears out, they won’t even glance your way. That’s where a respectable noble like me comes in. There’s nothing for either of us to lose; it’ll benefit both of our houses if we tie the knot. All you have to do is say one word, nod your head, and the deal is sealed.” It looked less like he was entreating her and more like he was pressing her to comply, as if he viewed her as inferior.

Lady Anna responded to him evenly. “We have gone over this repeatedly, Lord Laennec Owain. I have already refused your proposal.”

The moment he heard her say that, he barked back in a voice loud enough to rumble the bookshelves. “And I told you to quit playing games with me! At your age, you’re just an unwanted leftover. You may be more valuable now than you were before, but even you know that won’t last. Frumpy and homely as you are, I’m being nice enough to go out of my way and propose marriage to you.”

His tone almost seemed to say, *You should be grateful!* But even I had to furrow my brow.

Lady Anna responded again, unruffled. “In year 301 of the Ars Continent calendar, the reigning monarch of Sauslind at the time, King Rudolph, went on a military campaign to the east with an enormous force, to intimidate the surrounding countries. He failed in this endeavor. What do you suppose was the cause of his defeat?”

“...Huh?”

She continued. “It was again, shortly after that defeat, that Sauslind was temporarily driven to the brink of annihilation due to an alliance between three countries: the Kai Arg Empire, Maldura, and Naupa. The man who would posthumously be referred to as the Hero King, King Karl, rose up and dismantled the alliance, recovered our territory, and built the kingdom of Sauslind as we know it today. There are numerous books and epics written about the Hero King, but even at the height of his rule, he passed many disastrous policies. Which one do you think was the most catastrophic of them all?”

Laennec’s eyes seemed to be spinning. Perhaps he wasn’t able to follow her sudden deep-dive into the kingdom’s history.

Lady Anna’s voice sounded like that of a teacher whose student had failed to follow her lecture. “If you knew the answers to my questions, then you would realize just how fruitless your attempts right now are. Now then, if you will please excuse me.” She gave a ladylike curtsy before turning to leave.

Lord Laennec suddenly snapped back to reality and moved to stop her. "Wait—"

It was then that Lady Anna finally noticed me. Though it hadn't been my intention to do so, I had eavesdropped on their conversation. I bowed my head toward her, feeling guilty.

"Lady Elianna..." she said with a start.

As for Lord Laennec, just as he boasted, he certainly did have a sleek, handsome appearance befitting his status as a nobleman. Sadly, the way he seemed to hold his nose up at everything reduced any appeal he might have otherwise had by half.

"What fortuitous timing, Lady Elianna. Since you so rarely grace high society with your presence, there are a long line of people here eagerly seeking an opportunity to get close to you. Alas, it should have been obvious to me that I would find you in the library, given how you're referred to as the 'Bibliophile Princess.'" His greeting was a courtesy in name only. The words sounded polite, if not barbed, especially given how different in tone they were from how he'd spoken to Lady Anna moments before.

These types appeared occasionally. Though my father had been appointed to a key position, the Bernstein family wasn't particularly prosperous, nor was I equipped with the dignified manner expected of the crown prince's betrothed. Prince Christopher had elevated my reputation as the Bibliophile Princess and spread word of my accomplishments, but not everyone accepted those at face value. This was especially true for people like Lord Laennec, who seemed to look down on women, if his attitude toward Lady Anna was any indication.

The man continued his act. "I'm afraid I wasn't able to enjoy a dance with you the night of the party. My name is Laennec Owain. I hope we can take this opportunity to get closer."

Just moments ago he'd been soliciting Lady Anna, but now he was pressing his face closer to me, almost like a dog chasing a piece of meat. His facial features were swoon-worthy, to be sure, but while his gaze was sweet and inviting, it hardly held a candlestick to Prince Christopher's radiant smile. I remained unmoved.

"Being next in line for the title of crown princess must be suffocating for you. Whenever you need a breather, I would be happy to attend you." There was an eerie gleam in his eyes that prompted me to tilt my head questioningly.

"I appreciate the offer, but reading is something one does by oneself." Besides, reading books wasn't a way for me to get a "breather," it was as natural to me as breathing itself.

Lord Laennec's mouth twitched and then grew taut. I was less interested in him and his platitudes and more drawn in by Lady Anna.

"Lady Anna, pardon me for asking...but might I trouble you to

listen and review my answers to the questions you just posed?”

I was charmed by the intelligence she possessed. The education instructors and court ladies in the palace always prioritized the royal family, never discussing any flaws or critiques of them, not even if said royals were historical figures.

After a perplexed Lady Anna gave me a nod, I launched into my answer like a student who'd been given leave by their teacher to take the floor. “King Rudolph, the ruler of Sauslind at the time, was at one point regarded as one of the champions of the continent, a warrior king. He was also famous, however, for his indiscriminate attraction toward women. The reason cited for his failed campaign to the east is that his supply routes were cut off. Behind the scenes, those women he had haphazardly dragged into his harem were embroiled in a power struggle, dragging in even the regional lords of the kingdom. The resulting infighting was the primary reason for why his supply lines were cut off.

“King Karl, the Hero King, took just one woman as his queen during his life, one famously referred to in the stories as the Lady of the Lagoon, Princess Ceysheila. Unfortunately, she was never blessed with children and passed away at a young age. The king's retainers, desiring a blood-related heir, recruited a number of girls into the royal harem.

“This king was more cautious than his predecessor, having seen what chaos the infighting had wrought, but he never watched the women of his harem very closely. The ladies there all conducted themselves quite humbly on the outside, but behind the scenes they were leading extravagant lives comparable to queens of other countries—something King Karl realized all too late. This was the primary cause for the country's financial strain at the time.

“So the king welcomed a second wife, a princess from the wealthy Kai Arg empire, which led to Kai Arg's periodic interference in his reign. This triggered a war between Sauslind and the empire that lasted thirty years.”

I gave a small sigh as I paused. There was only one lesson to be drawn from this example. “Warrior Kings and Hero Kings alike have ruined themselves over women, permanently staining history as a result. What I believe you mean to say, Lady Anna, is that men should not rely upon women to obtain power and status.”

Lady Anna's dark blue eyes flickered. Then she smiled, like a teacher handing out a passing grade. “That's correct, Lady Elianna.”

My heart fluttered with joy to receive her praise—something I hadn't experienced in quite a while. I tried to continue the conversation, but then I realized that nearby, Lord Laennec's face was flushed red with anger.

“Enough of this nonsense. Are you honestly insinuating I would disgrace myself over a woman?!” Did he think we were making a mockery of him? I flinched at his threatening expression, and Lady Anna attempted to insert herself between us. She called his name as if in warning, but Lord Laennec merely shouted and shook her off. “Quiet! Impertinent women like you should learn to shut your mouths!”

His violence came out of nowhere. Lady Anna let out a small cry as she collided with one of the bookcases. I was about to raise my own voice when Lord Laennec turned his eyes on me, blood rushing to his head. “You sure are brazen for a powerless female! I’ll show you what a man’s strength truly is!”

I knew precisely the kind of danger he posed, and before he could grab me, I slammed the book I was holding right into his face.

Jean taught me how to defend myself against barbaric men like this, I remembered. Lord Laennec seemed ill-prepared for my counter attack and faltered, giving me the opening I needed. I let out a small cry as I lifted my leg.

That’s right. Jean had told me, “Put all your strength into it, m’lady.” And added, “Gotta finish them off in one blow. A violent man who still has the power to fight is even more dangerous than a regular criminal.”

Fortunately, my legs were toned from numerous trips up and down ladders. There was a pleasant sound as my kick landed with perfect precision right between his legs.

Lord Laennec’s jaw dropped in a voiceless cry. He collapsed in a heap, fainting from the agony. The way he was curled in a fetal position on the floor was rather unbecoming for a gentleman, but then I suppose, he hadn’t really conducted himself much like a gentleman either. It paired nicely with the unladylike behavior I had just exhibited myself.

There was one thing I had neglected to consider, however. While I had been taught to aim for my opponent when they were taken by surprise, I had still done something unthinkable. The book I used in lieu of a weapon was already in need of repair anyway. Smashing it into Lord Laennec’s face had only served to aggravate the damage further. Now the cover was almost completely detached.

Now I was *angry*—and feeling far more emotional than I ever had before. I shrieked at him without thinking. “What have you done?!”

“...That’s...my line...” he groaned back in anguish.

Multiple voices burst out into laughter behind us. I glanced back to find Prince Theodore, Lord Irvin and the same Kreis family manservant as before standing together. The black-haired servant and Lord Irvin were both cradling their stomachs as they cackled. Prince

Theodore's mirth was more subdued, per social decorum, as he approached and helped lift Lady Anna off the floor.

He had a chillingly cold smile on his face, one that perfectly resembled the prince's, as he turned toward Lord Laennec. "Ah yes, you're Baron Owain's son. I will be sure to relay this incident in *great* detail to Chris."

Lord Laennec's face instantly turned white. His despair was palpable, as if he were watching his future end right in front of him. Not that I had even an ounce of sympathy for the man; right now I was teary-eyed over something far more important, namely the book in my arms that was in dire straits.

Prince Theodore guided me away from the scene, compassion in his voice as he asked, "Eli, are you all right?"

No, nothing was all right! I knew my emotions were all over the place, but I had no means of reining them in. "Prince Theodore...!" I lifted my gaze to meet his.

Prince Theodore gulped and turned his head away. He looked flustered, a hand clamped over his mouth. "Crap, Chris will kill me if I don't watch it," he mumbled repeatedly to himself, for reasons beyond my ability to comprehend.

"Lady Elianna, the book will be just fine."

Lady Anna, who was cradling books of her own in her arms, examined the state of the tome in my hands. "With some repairs, it will be nearly as good as new," she assured.

I wiped away the tears beading in my eyes. I couldn't believe the atrocity I had committed—to an injured patient (book) no less! I could lament endlessly and my regret still wouldn't be enough to redeem what I'd done.

As I was immersed in such thoughts, I heard a strange, strangled laugh slip out from Lady Anna. "Lady Elianna, you truly are a book lover, aren't you?" Her eyes were full of envy, as if yearning for something she didn't possess. Almost as if she were thinking, *I wish I could be so open and honest about the things I like.*

I tilted my head and started to open my mouth so I could ask her to clarify, but the fuss outside prevented me from doing so.

When we stepped out of the library, we heard the sound of women's screams coming from farther down the hall. Prince Theodore and Lord Irvin started in that direction, leading the way as I tagged along behind. What we eventually found were some young noble ladies who were shrieking as they scrambled toward us.

Lilia, my cousin, was among their number and recognized me immediately. "Miss Eli! Prince Theodore!" She was still halfway down the hall, yet in just a few blinks she was suddenly right in front of my

eyes, her face flushed from all the commotion. Granted, I certainly had no business judging others, but this wasn't proper decorum for a lady. "I saw it, I saw it, I saw it! I saw *you*, Miss Eli!"

Overwhelmed by the grim look she wore, I blinked several times. And for some reason, Lilia seemed to jump, as though her thoughts had begun to consume her. "Wait," she said. "If you're here, then that means...the ghost we just saw wasn't you."

She certainly was an impertinent thing.

"A ghost?" Prince Theodore echoed back as the other noble ladies clung to him for protection.

Lady Sofia, who had been the first to sink her claws into him, answered, "It was Eidel's Ghost. There's a famous story about the apparition. People say it's the daughter of the previous regional lord. Apparently she didn't pass on like the rest of her family, and instead haunts the old castle. They also say those who lay eyes upon her will be beset with an unspeakable curse. Prince Theodore...!"

The tears, as well as the fear, in Lady Sofia's eyes was certainly enough to rouse a man's protective instincts. Prince Theodore smiled at her reassuringly and pressed for more details.

According to what Lilia shared with us, the other noble ladies of her generation had grown weary of the festivities and chatter, so they jumped on an opportunity to explore the old castle. While they were there, a white figure with long hair had appeared. It had stared blankly down at them before suddenly disappearing the next instant.

"We honestly never dreamed it would actually appear," said Lady Sofia. "I wonder if that truly is Eidel's Ghost?"

"Eidel's Ghost?" I asked, confused.

"Miss Eli," said Lilia, "have you not heard of it? You're aware that the Eidel Domain was previously held by a different lord, yes? Though, if I recall correctly...he was punished for treason, his family name discontinued. The rest of the members were disciplined as well. His young daughter was among them, but after she died, she didn't pass on like the rest. Instead, she remains here, wandering these halls. Or so the story goes."

I took a moment to think. I wasn't aware of this ghost story, but I did remember learning about why the Eidel Domain had fallen under direct control of the royal family.

As we were discussing this, the commotion around us had grown. Adults and members of the Kreis household had heard the ladies' screams, and now the duke and his wife had gathered here as well. Prince Theodore remained composed as he reined everyone in. He started by first entrusting Lilia and the others to Lady Kreis, instructing her to calm them all down.

Lady Sofia, still overcome with fear, entreated him, "I'm utterly

terrified, Prince Theodore. Please, I beg you to stay with me until my heart feels more at ease. Won't you...?"

"There is nothing for you to be afraid of so long as everyone else is with you. Have Lady Kreis fetch you some warm tea and try to calm your nerves." Once all the initial fuss and confusion had been settled, he turned to the level-headed Lilia and said, "Look after everyone."

I tried to follow her, but Prince Theodore stopped me. "Lady Elianna, please come with me. Lady Anna as well."

For a moment, I could feel Lady Sofia's fiery gaze turn toward me. It was momentary, however; in the span of a blink, her face had returned to its usual adorable expression. I almost wondered if her scowl had been a trick of my imagination.

As we were in the midst of leaving, Lord Irvin passed by me and whispered, "That was a splendid kick in the library." Amusement danced in his black irises.

Little did I realize, Lady Sofia had watched our brief interaction closely.

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We moved to another room, where Prince Theodore began discussing security detail with the captain of the imperial guard, Lord Sieg. He opted to leave out the ghost story for the moment, more concerned with the possibility that someone suspicious had found their way inside. Considering the number of aristocrats present at this manor, vigilance was paramount.

Prince Theodore sent off a message to relay the details to Duke Kreis before breathing a sigh. "Eli, I am sure I told you not to act alone while you're here."

I lowered my head. He was right; it was thoughtless of me, as the prince's betrothed, to go wandering about someone else's property by myself. I could feel my annoyance at Jean grow. He'd been with me at first but then suddenly disappeared off on his own. I wondered if his lack of work ethic warranted him a salary deduction. Or perhaps he deserved a reward for teaching me how to properly fend off an attacker?

"Well, that's one of her key selling points," said a voice casually, one belonging to the Kreis family manservant that was currently pouring tea for Lady Anna and me.

I cocked my head to the side. Were the two of us acquainted somehow?

He brushed back the strands of his black hair, revealing a handsome face and watchful emerald-green eyes. But the look on his face was one of dejection. "I didn't think you had noticed yet, but...how forgettable am I if you can't recognize me just because I

died my hair...? It's me...Alan."

I blinked in surprise. This was the master musician, Maestro Alan Ferrera, one of the prince's direct subordinates? Curious as to the reason for his presence here, I asked, "Oh my... Lord Alan, I didn't realize you'd switched jobs. You're now employed by the Kreis family, then?"

Prince Theodore's shoulders suddenly dropped as if in exasperation. Nearby, I could hear Lord Sieg trying to stifle his laughter. The two men were about the same age, and Lord Sieg was Lord Glen's older brother. He had the characteristic ginger hair of the Eisenach family, but while his appearance suggested he was a skilled fighter, his slightly downturned eyes gave him a more approachable aura.

"Lady Elianna, I suspect Prince Christopher knew some would see this as an opportunity to approach you," said Lord Sieg.

Surprised, my eyelids fluttered.

Prince Theodore exhaled a small sigh before agreeing. "There are some who would find you easier to approach when Chris isn't around. Though I am sure Alex is the one behind the defense strategy we just witnessed you using... As a fellow man, I can't help but shudder to think of what awaits anyone who might unsuspectingly lay a finger on you." His voice was so grim that I felt my cheeks light up. I never dreamed Prince Theodore would be there to witness my kick. Beside him, Lady Anna was struggling to hold in her giggles.

Lord Sieg had a questioning look on his face but soon cleared his throat and continued, "At any rate, Lady Elianna, I don't mean to cause you needless alarm, but something is off about this year's Hunting Festival. Take care of yourself, and please do be cautious of your actions." I gave a meek nod under the intense pressure of his gaze.

Lady Anna responded earnestly, "Should I also bring this to my father's attention?"

"Earl Hayden has already figured it out," said Lord Sieg. "No surprise, he is called the Guardian of the Border for a reason. I'd love his assistance in drilling the younger recruits...and Glen."

For some reason, it seemed as if I was the only one present who felt any sympathy for poor Lord Glen.

Lord Sieg bowed toward Prince Theodore then hastily took his leave.

As if to recompose himself, Prince Theodore breathed yet another sigh. Then he put his hands—supple from his work in the archives managing books, yet angular and masculine all the same—on his lap. "Eli, I didn't call you and Lady Anna here for a mere small exchange of words."

I straightened myself. It seemed Prince Theodore and the others hadn't appeared in the library out of mere coincidence. At the same time, I recalled the doubt that had crossed my mind when I first saw them. Was the young Lord Irvin some sort of acquaintance of Prince Theodore's?

"Do the two of you know the history of the Eidel Domain?" Prince Theodore asked.

Lady Anna and I instinctively exchanged glances. Even Lilia, who had brought up the ghost story, had hesitated to broach the topic any further. I decided to speak up on Lady Anna's behalf. "Before it fell into the direct control of the royal family, this land was governed by a lord who conspired with Maldura to rebel against the crown. This resulted in the annihilation of his entire house, and as I was taught, almost every member of his family was penalized for this."

Prince Theodore gave a small, quiet nod. "It was twenty years ago. At the time, my brother—the current king—had not yet ascended to the throne, and his father was still in command of the kingdom. Duke Slade, lord of the Eidel Domain, was discovered to be plotting a rebellion. He'd formed an alliance with Maldura and was waiting for an opportunity to strike, so the Maldurans could invade the Edea Domain while he and his men in Eidel rose up to launch an attack on the capital. That was their plan."

I swallowed hard.

Beside me, Lady Anna added, "I heard something from my father before. He said that even if the defenses in Edea were to ever be breached, they would make use of the remnants of the fort here in Eidel as their second line of defense. It's thanks to the position of that fortress that the capital Saoura has remained intact since the time of the Hero King."

I understood its importance as a defensive point. I also knew that, in the worst case scenario, if we were to be attacked from our borders as well as from within, the capital and its surrounding domains wouldn't be able to hold out for long. It was hard to believe that this very same worst case scenario had almost played out twenty years prior.

There was pain reflected in Prince Theodore's eyes. "Duke Slade's family proudly boasted that they were direct descendants of the Hero King. His house was also in clear opposition to the current royal family. At the time, I was a child, not even quite ten years old, but as a political maneuver, my family was considering an engagement between myself and Duke Slade's fifteen-year-old daughter."

Putting the pieces together in my mind, I gently asked, "Prince Theodore, did you perhaps meet with this young lady?"

"Indeed. My body was quite frail as a child, so I was sent to the

countryside where the climate was more temperate so I could be treated. That was where the two of us met. She was...somewhat similar to you, Eli.”

Both Lady Anna and I fell silent. The woman in question was most likely the very person Lilia and the others had referred to when speaking of the Ghost of Eidel. Considering her family had committed a treasonous act against the state, it was easy to guess what happened to her in the end.

Prince Theodore let out a small grunt and smiled faintly. “So then, that’s the history of this land. Earl Hayden still carries memories of the event, which is apparently why he participates in Eidel’s Hunting Festival each year. Did your father tell you any of that, Lady Anna?”

“No...not a word. Um, are you absolutely certain that Duke Slade attempted to commit treason?” Lady Anna tacked on hesitantly as I looked her way. “Hearing this story made me remember something... I heard that Duke Slade’s wife was beloved by the people for her brilliance.”

A heavy-hearted sigh slipped past Prince Theodore’s lips. “The duke’s wife passed away before the incident. Though it is said the person who discovered the plot was someone within his family, someone who secretly relayed what was happening. Once I was a little older, I reexamined the matter. There was no mistake about his attempt to commit treason.”

Lady Anna nodded as if she accepted what he was saying. But then Lord Alan casually interjected, “Truly, Prince Theodore, must you speak of such boorish topics to these ladies? It’s worrying. As for you, Lady Elianna, I have a message from the prince. One so sweet it’s gag-inducing. He said, ‘Just be yourself, that’s more than enough.’”

“His Highness said that...?”

“Oh, trust me, he said a lot of other sickening things; that’s the abridged version,” Lord Alan informed me, almost like a mischievous child. Still, his emerald green eyes were straightforward and honest as he smiled at me. “The fact that I am here is proof of his feelings for you, my lady.”

Those words gave me more strength than anything I’d heard recently. I smiled sincerely, for the first time in a long while. In the process, it completely slipped my mind to address my suspicion about Lord Irvin with Prince Theodore.

Chapter 5: Attack in the Dead of Night

It was night, with a light drizzle pelting the highway. The animals in the forest had no doubt been sleeping peacefully until a cacophony of clapping horse hooves and angry shouts roused them from their slumber as a distinctly bloodthirsty aura crept in. Torchlight and flashes of steel as swords were swung blurred through the night. The veil of darkness was disrupted by momentary sparks as metal clashed against metal in a successive rhythm that echoed jarringly.

I used the momentum of my body to sink my blade into the person charging at me. Almost as quickly I could hear a reprimanding shout from behind. “Chris! You’re charging out too far in front!” Glen, who was guarding my rear, was the one shrieking at me.

Prompted by his warning, I scanned our surroundings. We were on a narrow highway stretched between villages, one yet unpaved. In a column behind me were two other members of the imperial guard on horseback. Our formation had become disjointed as attackers encroached through the cloak of rain and darkness. As my men fought them off, I charged out in front. Perhaps my actions were a product of the restlessness I felt inside.

This works perfectly, I thought, lunging on ahead, only for Glen’s panicked cry to ring out from behind.

There was one attacker hot on my heels. In the same instant I spotted the man, I raised my sword to parry the oncoming blow. My eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, piercing right through the veil of rain.

By the looks of these men, from what I could see of them, they were night bandits. The murderous intent they displayed wasn’t merely for show, but even I could discern that it wasn’t aimed at me specifically. I had charged in front to make myself an easy target, yet only one of their ilk had chased after me. After two rounds of clashing on horseback, I felled my opponent. The lack of resistance made it clear that these were not people with designs on taking my life due to my status.

The imperial guards accompanying me were some of the most elite soldiers, but they were few in number and under attack in the dead of night on a road they were unfamiliar with. I called out to them, “These are lowly night bandits, remnants from last year’s purge

that managed to slink away! There's no need to hold back or apprehend this lot. Cut them down!"

These guards, under pressure as they were, had a warrior's spirit residing within—that much I knew for certain. They were duty-bound to protect me, given that I was the crown prince of Sauslind. They also believed that anyone targeting my life would need to be apprehended so we could extract information from them about the puppetmaster holding the strings. Given that they were unaccustomed to battling at night as well, there was hesitation in the way they handled their blades. Now that I had determined these were merely bandits, however, they displayed no hesitation in launching a counteroffensive.

A massive form emerged amidst the rain as the silhouette of a man on horseback blocked my way. "Tryin' to make a fool outta us, eh? Who you callin' 'lowly night bandits'?" The viciousness in his tone cut the air like a dagger.

As soon as I determined that this must be their leader, I scoffed at him. His enmity was nothing compared to the irritation I felt. "I merely spoke the truth. How stupid must you be to mistake a band of knights on horseback for the merchants you normally target? Your fate was sealed the moment you misjudged and decided to commit thievery in this country."

I barely finished my sentence before the man howled and spurred his horse, charging straight toward me. He came at me with a weighty blow that I could tell at a glance would be foolish to meet head-on, so I lifted my sword, reared my horse, and glanced off the attack. Sparks flew, an ear-splitting screech of metal echoing through the rain.

As I was straightening myself for the next onslaught, Glen exclaimed, "Chris! To your left!" My eyes flashed in that direction. They were attempting a powerful pincer attack; another bandit was swinging his blade at my left, where my free hand was gripping the reins, while the man from before brought his sword whizzing down toward my right side.

My decision was immediate. I slipped my left leg out of the stirrup and jammed my foot into the belly of the enemy's horse to my left, causing the animal to bray as the attack went off course. As soon as he was dealt with, I turned my attention to the other bandit, managing to parry the blur that came sweeping from my right. I could feel a sharp jolt ripple through my arm.

In a single instant, I glimpsed both the man grinning at me as well as a rippling flash of red that clipped through the darkness—I wasn't sure which of these two came first. All I knew was that Glen had cut the man down, sending him plummeting to the ground.

When I looked back, the other guards had already taken care of the other bandit and forced him off his horse. There were only two

bandits that yet remained, having missed their opportunity to escape. Now that I saw our victory was assured, I swept my arm through the air in an attempt to shake off the lingering numbness.



Glen pulled his horse around to face me and I immediately began chastising him in annoyance. “Your interruption was tasteless and unnecessary.”

“Okay, you...”

I was too irritated at the bandits on the ground to pay much attention to the anger filling Glen’s voice. “We’re trying to hasten our return, and you lot of thugs senselessly delayed us. Haven’t you heard the saying that those who dare obstruct a lover’s path will be trampled under a horse’s feet?”

“Hey now...”

The exhaustion in Glen’s voice prompted me to steady my breathing, flipping my head around as if to shake off the troublesome droplets trickling down my face.

Glen’s breathing was similarly uneven as he took in our surroundings. “Where are your Shadows? I don’t see any of them.”

As the name implied, the Shadows were a group assigned to members of the royal family, intended to secretly guard us. The imperial guard acted as my overt protection, while the Shadows were covert. They were essentially pieces on a chessboard, used to carry out secret operations and information gathering that couldn’t otherwise be conducted publicly. Despite the symbolism of their name, they were actual living, breathing people, so they split themselves into two groups as they accompanied us. One went out in front to scout for possible danger and relay information, and the other remained behind us, prepared to lend aid in case anything unforeseen occurred. Yet we’d received no word from the scouts who’d gone on ahead, and no one had appeared despite the tight spot we’d found ourselves in. No doubt that had roused Glen’s suspicion.

Once I was sure the battle was over, I swung my sword to fling off the droplets of water that had formed on it then slipped it back into its sheath. “The scouting team was assigned to guard Eli.”

“What?! Well that explains why we had no warning about those bandits’ surprise attack... Wait, that’s not what’s important here! You — What kind of royal splits up his own bodyguards?!”

So fussy, I thought, wrinkling my face as I counted the number of men on their horses. We still had the same number as when we’d set out from the Miseral Dukedom. The highway was crowded with imperial guards on horseback, breathing raggedly. On the ground below were the bandits, groaning from the pain of the wounds they’d sustained.

Unwilling to waste even a moment more of our time, I barked my orders. “Fritz, return to Russell Village and gather their militia and men and bring them here. Once you’ve reported to other neighboring

villages, follow after us. I leave the clean-up here to you. Let's be on our way!"

"Hold...! Chris, you...wait!" Glen whipped around in front of me, grabbing my horse by the bridle to stop me.

I fixed him with an annoyed glare. "I'm in a hurry."

"Yeah, we're all painfully aware of that! Enough, just calm down. First, we need to check the injured and then clean up this mess. If we leave it, we'll have Alex's snide remarks and criticism waiting for us back home. Also..." He adjusted his tone, pinning me with an admonishing look. "I can't agree with continuing in this darkness, not tonight."

The words went unspoken, but his eyes seemed to say he'd force me to stop if he had to. I knew that once he had that look on him, it wouldn't be easy to talk him down. Even so, I continued to glare back, possessed by a sense of urgency.

He gave a small sigh. "Besides, do you even understand what you look like right now? You're like that mouse-colored man that appeared in that book Lady Elianna read this summer. The one called *Top One-Hundred Bizarre Stories from the Capital*. Do you really plan to race back to her side looking like a drowned rat covered in bandits' blood? You *do* know that you'll just cause her undue worry in the process, right?"

I knit my brows for a moment. "My appearance can wait until later. There's nothing more important than her safety."

"A wonderful sentiment, but if you can't even manage to throw something witty back at me, that just proves how much you need to rest right now. If you really did split your Shadows up to protect her, then she shouldn't be in that much danger anyway. You also have others there to protect her too, right? Trust the people you chose to send. And at any rate, take a moment to catch your breath."

I clicked my tongue in frustration at his refusal to back down. Sensing a new presence approaching, I turned my head to find the neighboring village's militia and townsmen. The Shadows following from behind must have sent for them.

Somehow, I managed to swallow back my swelling impatience.

The peaceful, sleeping village of Russell was suddenly enveloped in a cacophony of noise as people flooded in. On the one hand, there were the injured bandits, apprehended and dragged all the way here. On the other, there were the people who had disarmed and captured them—my unit of mounted men that had been en route to the capital.

Russell was located in the southwest part of Sauslind, and its people awoke with the fuss, rousing even their children. They were already surprised enough to see what they thought was a highway

patrol unit when they rarely saw anyone outside of merchants coming through these parts. If they were to realize our true identity, that this patrol was actually the imperial guard assigned to the palace and I their prince, it would really flip their world upside down and cause a stir. Regardless, we could still see them scrambling to accommodate our late night intrusion. They were offering us a warm welcome despite the circumstances.

“Looks like this village hasn’t been hit by the bandits yet. Good thing we were able to stop them before anything happened,” Glen said once we’d secured a room after speaking with the head of the village.

It was just as I had told my guards before; as maintenance progressed with the highways here in the countryside, the bandits were driven out of their nests. It was one of our objectives as a country to weed out such criminals, but even if you captured them, more would soon rise up from somewhere else. Most were hoodlums filtering in from across the border, their eyes on Sauslind’s wealth.

Once preparations were complete, I sighed quietly as I headed toward the bath. Though, I soon realized Glen was tagging along behind me. Calmly, I informed him, “I have no interest in bathing with other men.”

“I don’t either!” he instantly barked back, groaning in exhaustion. “Now isn’t the time for you to be fussing over your social status and whatnot. In fact, considering how sparse your security is already, there’s no way I could let you go alone.” He began pulling off his clothes as he instructed me, “Now strip and stop whining.”

He continued, “The village leader’s wife is being kind enough to wash and dry our clothes for us even though it’s the middle of the night. Hurry up now, don’t put their good will to waste.”

As Glen outstretched his hand toward my shirt, I promptly (and coolly) informed him, “I also have no interest in other men undressing me.”

“Hey, the only clothes I enjoy taking off are ladies’ dresses!”

“Make no mistake, I have no ill feelings toward you if you harbor such sexual inclinations, but I’m sorry, I only have eyes for Eli.”

“And I only have eyes for gorgeous women!” Glen shouted. “Stop assuming other people have such a wide sexual scope!”

“You don’t have to scream out your sexual proclivities for all to hear. Are you really that insecure about yourself?”

“And who’s the one creating this misunderstanding to begin with?!” he screeched back, running out of breath and glaring at me in exasperation.

“If you keep wailing like that, you’ll drain your own stamina, Glen.”

“God, give me strength...” He limply pressed his hand against the

wall. This man, now standing with a slump in his back, didn't look like the man who commanded a select elite of the imperial guard. His voice, heavy with exhaustion, gave a belated retort that was mumbled and half-incoherent, "I am *only* attracted to women..."

I left him (and his boatful of complaints) to his own devices and focused on quickly washing myself. The villagers had gone out of their way to warm the water for us even though it was so late, and at this rate it would get cold before I had the chance to enjoy it. Only a fool would put other people's good will to waste.

It wasn't until I got the rain and the scent of blood off me that I could finally take a breath. While the other imperial guards were assigned a room together, the leader had supplied me with one of my own. As I plopped myself down inside, alone, I could sense someone's presence by the window. It was as if they'd been waiting for me. I was no stranger to this, so I didn't even turn my head as I asked, "What's the current situation?"

There was a short moment of silence before they replied. Their low, quiet voice filtered in, the words disappearing almost quickly amidst the sound of the rain. There was something unreadable about their tone as well, giving no insight into the speaker's age. "It's been confirmed, there are bandits from other countries amassing in the Eidel Domain. Some crossed the borders and others gathered from the Kelk Harbor in the west, culminating into a band of thugs. They're nearly twenty strong."

I reflexively furrowed my brows. Their number had increased since the last report I'd received.

"We're also certain they're targeting someone important that's staying in the area as well. Their movements are too unsettled for us to determine whether that person is Prince Theodore, Lady Elianna or someone else altogether. There's also one other present whose identity we were unable to confirm—"

"You couldn't get any information?"

"...No."

My hands curled into tight fists at their answer.

The initial report arrived just two days ago, on the very same day that we first arrived in the Miseral Dukedom. I was told there were a number of people of unknown origin who had crossed our borders and gathered together in the Eidel Domain. There was one other besides them, an unofficial guest from abroad whose true identity remained unknown.

At this point, it was little more than a minor problem. Even if these ruffians were looking to harm someone high-up, it was no different from usual; those in high positions were accustomed to such danger. If political aims were involved, then that would require more

careful consideration, however.

This time was especially irregular, with both my uncle and father (the king) showing their own motives. That bothered me. There was something they weren't telling me. It seemed to me they were trying to use Elianna to test something. If this unknown person was who I suspected...well, then I couldn't just blindly sit by here in the Miseral Dukedom. So I left the rest to our ambassador, took along a few of the imperial guard, and hastened back home.

Still, the Eidel Domain was far. If anything were to happen to Eli in the meantime...

"Guh..." My knuckles turned white from how hard I was squeezing my hand.

My mind had been empty as we galloped down the road, driven by impatience. Now that I had time to rest my body, my mind was suddenly overwhelmed. Anxious and fearful thoughts came bubbling up from deep within.

Eli was no less susceptible to being targeted for political reasons, given that she was my betrothed. Inside of Sauslind, my inner circle and I could keep a vigilant watch, and I could protect her so long as I was at her side. But right now we were apart. If someone foreign were to get involved... My mind instantly jumped to the worst possible scenarios, like how they might use her and expose her to danger. Dark, vicious thoughts flooded my mind as I pictured what I might do to anyone who tried to manipulate her for their own ends.

A calmer side of myself whispered, *The reason she's even in a position where others might use or target her is entirely because you wanted to keep her at your side.* I managed to push those thoughts away by thrusting a hand through my still-damp hair. Even so, once my imagination had begun to run wild, it wasn't easy to rein it in.

If I hadn't become the crown prince, then Elianna wouldn't be led around by all these other people, wouldn't be in danger, wouldn't be manipulated by them. She'd be able to live an ordinary, peaceful life surrounded by her beloved books.

I knew I was contradicting myself. Even having known all of that, I wanted her to be with me. Yet now, when I considered the worst possibility, my heart filled with unease, all strength leaving me.

Dammit! I cursed inwardly, tormented by an intense restlessness and haunting mental agony. Despite all of that, one feeling stubbornly remained. *I can't give her up.*

The choice to let her go simply didn't exist for me. Given the option to return to the past, I know I'd make the same decision all over again. This was due to my own ego, my own unapologetic selfishness. Even if it meant robbing her of the peaceful life she should've had, even if it meant pulling her out of the comfort of her

books and forcing her into the gruesomeness of reality, I wanted her to be with me.

Suddenly, as I was chewing my lip hard enough to bite through the skin, a soft pink color fluttered into my line of sight. It was a woman's ribbon, fastened around my left wrist. I'd rewrapped it around my hand when I got out of the bath, but it had managed to come loose and drift into my field of vision.

"..."

I cradled it in my left hand as gently as one would porcelain, feeling something well up within. *Eli...* I pressed it against my forehead, as if inwardly calling out her name. For a few moments, I went silent so as to steady my breathing. Then, as the Shadow quietly waited for my next command, I asked, "Any report from Alan?"

"The guest in question has been approaching Lady Elianna. Judging by how things were during the hunt, there's a high likelihood this man has an inside connection. Alan said he was looking into it. It also appears your hunch about the identity of that group of thugs was correct as well."

"All right..."

I knew it, I thought. I could feel my eyes go cold. If they were going to test Elianna, I'd figured *this* was what they'd use.

I tucked one end of the ribbon into my mouth, retying it around my wrist. "And what's that man's connection to those thugs?"

"...I have no information on that as of this moment. However, there is no mistake that they're from the same country. Alan said...that their target is likely Lady Elianna."

The simmering anger within me only mounted as I heard that. If this man really was who I suspected and he was connected to those thugs, then what was their objective? Or if my uncle actually did know the man's identity, then did that mean the thugs were entirely unrelated to either of them?

"...Can you at least round up that unsavory bunch before I return?"

If we really did have a traitor in our midst helping them, we could just extract that information from them directly. If the man in question was approaching Elianna, then he was either eying her for her status or looking to use her knowledge for some other end.

A brief silence ensued before the Shadow replied again. "...If you're willing to send some of your men along with me, yes."

It required no consideration. Eliminating any potential threat near Eli was top priority. But before I could give them the order, an exasperated voice cut in, "Not happening."

Glen now appeared, having finished in the bath after me. He was currently toweling down his hair. He wore the same emotion on his

face that was present in his voice. "For the love of all that is holy. What person sends off all of their Shadows? You, too, are in a position where you don't know who will come after you or when. Besides, what if this is a trap? What if their aim is to take Lady Elianna hostage to force you into rushing back? What if they're just waiting for you to thin out the number of your guards so they can attack?"

I narrowed my eyes slightly and stared at him. It was rare for him to lose his composure, yet he'd had none when we fought those bandits. He'd held nothing back either. It made sense as to why now.

Glen hadn't earned his position of bodyguard to the crown prince merely because he was my childhood friend. Despite what his personality might lead you to believe, his skills were exemplary, even by guard standards. He was even intelligent enough to analyze the situation, as he'd just displayed, and his subordinates placed a lot of trust in him.

It wasn't as if I hadn't considered the possibility; I'd merely deduced that I wasn't being targeted precisely because my father's own motives were wrapped up in all of this. Apparently, from Glen's point of view, I was too preoccupied trying to protect Eli to make rational decisions.

...Well, he wasn't entirely wrong, anyway. I gave a small sigh.

As if to try and soothe me, Glen said, "I just told you, didn't I? Trust in the people around you. One of your biggest faults is that you try to solve everything by yourself. Lady Elianna already made the decision to stay with you. She should understand by now what kind of position that puts her in. Stop trying to be so overprotective of her and have a little faith."

I regarded my childhood friend suspiciously. "When did you become my nagging sister-in-law?"

"At least call me your father-in-law...wait, that's not important. Anyway, Alex isn't here, so the role naturally falls to me."

As he mumbled at me from behind, I let out another sigh. I did trust Eli. I was sure, given how serious she was, that she was doing her utmost to fulfill the role she'd been given. She would probably be surprised and concerned for my position when she learned I'd cut my official duties short to hurry back. It was the same attitude she'd had when we departed, so it was easy to imagine her reaction. Still, it did nothing to sway me.

I stared at my sister-in-law (or so I'd dubbed him) in annoyance before ordering the Shadow, "Continue to report."

Though the Shadow's voice was monotone, I could sense a rare show of emotion from them, as if they were smiling bitterly. "Very well," they said before disappearing.

Even if we hurried, it would still be four more days before we

arrived in the Eidel Domain. It was currently the third day of the Hunting Festival. The real question was whether or not we'd arrive before the last day, though my biggest concern was that something might happen in the interim.

I scowled at Glen, hardening my resolve. If the worst came to pass before I could arrive, even if Eli was safe, Glen would have to take responsibility. I'd shave every last strand of that ginger hair until all that was left was a shiny, bald head.

Chapter 6: The Shadow Behind the Scenes

The rain had lifted in the Eidel Domain, giving way to a cloudless, sunny blue sky. It had poured throughout the night and washed over the forest, which now gleamed a blinding emerald in the light. The smell of lush green was carried on a breeze that rustled the autumn leaves, almost making it seem as if this forest, with its abundant harvest, were alive.

“M’lady, quit spacing out and staring up at the sky. Watch what’s in front of you, please.”

Feeling mildly affronted by my foul-mouthed manservant’s tone, I dropped my gaze, only to find Jean with a disgusted look on his face as he stared down at his feet. He was wading through the mud as he gripped my horse’s bridle.

The forest was embellished with all the colors of life, but the ground remained mush after yesterday’s rain. I had yet to sample the unpleasantness of it since I was atop a horse, but I did feel bad for Jean.

Today was the fourth day of the Hunting Festival. This morning, Lady Sofia had ventured into my room to invite me along with her to watch the men on their hunt. “If you really are here on Prince Christopher’s behalf, then instead of sitting around quietly, shouldn’t you be out on the field? That way you can compliment the noble lords personally as you witness them exercise their skills first hand,” she had said.

It forced me to consider. I dreaded the thought of it, given my lack of finesse with horseback riding, but I took the plunge and accepted her offer nonetheless. Prince Theodore’s expression had shown clear disapproval at my participation, and even Jean had been discontent with my decision. Only Lady Anna had cheerily offered to accompany me.

That brings us to the present. The group of nobles a short distance ahead of us belonged not to Prince Theodore but rather Earl Hayden. One of Lady Sofia’s friends had remarked, “Having both of the crown’s representatives together at once would make the competition seem biased.” I could see her point, so I agreed to Lady Anna’s proposal that we participate in the earl’s group instead.

After a moment of thought, I suggested to Jean, “How about we

ride together, with you behind me?" Ladies had to ride sideways in the saddle, making it incredibly precarious. I was somehow managing to keep my balance, but a rear support would be of great comfort.

Jean immediately wrinkled his face. "Could you not make such suggestions so lightly? Do you want to shorten my lifespan?"

What in the world could he mean by that? I tilted my head in wonder.

Lady Anna gracefully maneuvered the reins in her hand to guide her horse over to us, even as she sat in the same position as me in her saddle. Her back was arched beautifully. She looked so dignified as she rode, not like me who needed a manservant to pull her along.

"Here, Lady Elianna, have one," she said.

"Oh," I replied, smiling at what she'd passed over to me. "It's an acorn."

"Yes. Eidel's forest has a full harvest this year, with acorns and fruits aplenty. I am sure we can expect the hunting to be bountiful as well."

"That would be wonderful," I said. "Animals who consume acorns and other nuts and berries tend to smell less gamey and taste much better."

"Indeed," Lady Anna agreed. "I read a book once that spoke of the Buna Woods to the west of the Eidel Domain. There are pig farmers there, said to rear their livestock on acorns from the trees. Pigs raised that way are absolutely delicious, the writer claimed."

"There was an article about meat consumption in *The Travels of Parco Molo* as well. Across the sea, in a land far away, there's a country with a custom of eating raw horse meat. I'm very interested in what the flavor of it must be like."

"Goodness," she said. "Raw horse meat? Wouldn't that upset the stomach?"

"Apparently they eat the meat together with herbs. The horses used for consumption are also raised separately from those used for riding. Foreign culinary tastes and countryside cooking certainly are interesting enough to warrant attention, don't you think?"

Lady Anna nodded in agreement.

As we continued our excited discussion about meat consumption in other cultures, Jean gently stroked my horse and mumbled, "I know, awfully disturbing conversation comin' from two noblewomen, ain't it?"

There weren't many noblewomen accompanying the earl's group. I kept myself entertained by speaking with Lady Anna, but there were other ladies present as well. Among them was one of Lady Sofia's followers. She was near the back of our group, where I soon noticed noise erupting from. One of the horses had been in a foul mood the

entire time, in spite of the manservant's desperate efforts to keep it under control. The cacophony of hunting dogs howling once they'd spotted their quarry had sent the horse over the edge, and the servant was no longer able to rein it in.

A shriek behind us prompted me to look over my shoulder. The horse was enraged, whipping about as the lady on top of it clung desperately to its back. All of the attendants around us were flustered, at a loss for what to do. I swallowed hard as I watched, similarly panicked. At this rate, there was a high chance she would fall and gravely injure herself.

Beside me, Jean airily commented, "Ahh, so she decided to ride that horse, huh?"

I gave him a questioning look.

He remained aloof, guiding my horse from the source of the fuss as he shrugged. "They prepared that horse for you to ride originally, but it seemed kinda on edge, so I had them change it. Pretty sure I told 'em not to let anyone ride the beast, though."

Oh no, I thought, my blood running cold. If the circumstances had been a little different, it might be me facing this danger instead of—well, um, her name escaped me at the moment—this lady.

While Lady Anna and I put some distance between ourselves and the ruckus, I could hear a voice crying out behind us, "Help!" And as soon as I did, I couldn't ignore the situation anymore. I felt responsible now. "Jean...isn't there something you can do?"

My request earned me an exasperated look. "I knew you'd say that," Jean mumbled, his discontent apparent, then sighed. "Whatever you do, please stay put," he instructed before wading his way toward the raging steed. He didn't have to tell me twice; I didn't have the skills to maneuver a horse on my own anyway.

Lady Anna and I watched as he adeptly dodged out of the horse's trajectory and then swept in like a shadow, approaching the horse's neck. It was impossible to tell what he'd done from afar. Whatever it was, once he had finished, the horse crashed to the ground. Jean emerged safely, with the lady in his arms clinging to his chest.

Just as I was breathing a sigh of relief...

"Lady Elianna!" Lady Anna screamed at me.

I turned my head in time to see a boar charging at me from the side, an arrow protruding from its skin. Had it somehow veered away from the men during the hunt?

The horse must have sensed my panic because it started forward when I seized the reins in my hands. Lady Anna tried to reach over and take them for me to steady the horse, but that only served to startle it. It whinnied and reared.

"...Ah!"

Suddenly, I was flung out of the saddle. I could hear Lady Anna shriek. Seconds seemed to stretch on as I waited for my body to slam against the ground. Instead I felt my body flump against something much softer than I'd expected. I also felt a firm arm snake its way around my waist. I wasn't entirely sure how I'd managed it, but somehow I'd avoided landing in the mud.

My cheek was pressed against someone's hard chest, their pulse fluttering in my ear. I looked up to discover Lord Irvin's face close above me, his black eyes narrowed and wary as he scanned the area.

By the time I turned my gaze back to the uproar, the earl had already caught up and felled the beast. A crowd had formed, lords and ladies alike drawn in by the commotion.

"Hey, you. Are you hurt?" Lord Irvin's tone was so boorish that it caught me off guard and all the tension left my body.

Still feeling a bit dazed, I replied, "I'm fine." Apparently he'd saved me after I'd been thrown from my saddle. He still had an arm wrapped around me, cradling me as I sat sideways atop his horse. "Thank you, Lord Irvin." As soon as the words left my lips, it was as if my heart came drumming back to life after being frozen from the fear. The sound of it hammered in my ears, and I started shivering now that the terror had finally caught up with me.

While I tried to calm myself, I could sense Lord Irvin grinning above. "Your motor reflexes aren't too great, are they?" His impoliteness didn't end there; he added, in a voice just above a whisper to ensure I could hear, "Not that I expected much, judging by your looks."

Lady Anna and the earl rushed over to us. After I nodded to confirm I was all right, the earl produced the arrow that had struck the boar, his expression wary. He shot Lord Irvin a quiet look. "Is this yours?"

"...No. The only types of arrows I carry are those provided for use during the Hunting Festival."

I'd heard that special bows and arrows were provisioned for the Hunting Festival so that accurate counts could be made on what group had caught which prey. The feathers at the end of the arrows in Lord Irvin's quiver were notably different from the ones attached to the arrow that had been retrieved from the boar.

I cocked my head slightly. "That boar just now, was it not one that you gentlemen were hunting?"

Earl Hayden's sharp eyes turned toward me. "We would never let our quarry slip away in the wrong direction." That must have meant another group's prey had wandered into our midst then.

The earl breathed a sigh after watching me shrink back under his gaze. "For now, please return to the manor. I realize you are here in

place of the crown, but there's no guarantee you won't get injured out here. Not when you're so unaccustomed to riding. Knowing your own abilities is a vital part of your role as well. Wouldn't you agree, Young Miss Bernstein?"

I'd earned his remonstrance yet again. "Yes," I replied dejectedly, hanging my head. "I apologize for the trouble I've caused you, my lord."

He spared me a glance before turning his eyes to his daughter, as if to say he was leaving the rest to her. Then he steered his mount around and left.

Lady Anna suggested I dismount from Lord Irvin's horse so that we might return, but he offered to give me a ride back instead, insisting he was headed that way already.

Jean pulled my horse along behind us, murmuring to himself with an ominous look on his face. "You got cursed 'cause you kept talkin' about horse meat, m'lady."

I thanked Lord Irvin for his kindness once we got back to the manor. Then I parted ways with Lady Anna and Jean, the latter of whom left to return my horse to the stables. I was just about to retreat to the safety of my own room to be alone when a voice called out from behind me.

"Oh my, if it isn't Lady Elianna."

I glanced back to find Lady Sofia and her friends, who had returned from their outing moments ago as well.

She wore a look of concern on her face as she approached. "I heard what happened, that you wandered into the middle of a hunt and nearly fell from your horse. Are you uninjured?"

"It was entirely my fault, Lady Sofia. I didn't realize Lady Elianna was so inept at horseback. I was so certain, given that she's the crown prince's betrothed, that she would be able to ride as perfectly as she had danced," said one of Lady Sofia's friends. She spoke so loudly that her voice reached even the ears of those not yet informed of what had happened.

Feeling a bit perplexed by their behavior, I tried to gloss it over. "I appreciate your concern. As you can see, I didn't sustain any injuries, though I was able to see firsthand how rigorous the hunt can be. I think I should laud the men for their skill from the safety of the manor instead of intruding where I don't belong." I gave them a nod and tried to peel myself away, but Lady Sofia's booming voice stopped me.

"I am pleased to hear you weren't injured. However, Lady Elianna, as the prince's fiancée, I question how appropriate it was for you to ride like that on another gentleman's horse. Rumors are already stirring. People are whispering about how you and the lord that saved

you looked like a beautiful, storybook couple together. A charming compliment, in its own way.”

I was a bit bewildered by her snickering.

One of her friends excitedly continued, “Oh, are you talking about the gentleman who delivered her back to the manor a moment ago? That man certainly does have a charm about him, one that’s different from Prince Christopher. I must confess, I am so jealous of you, Lady Elianna. You truly are popular with the men.”

Even I understood it was her back-handed way of calling my behavior indecent. Although, I could agree with her point that my behavior didn’t reflect well on me; I was engaged to the prince, and yet I’d nearly gotten injured because of my own inability to ride a horse. My heart sank as I struggled to come up with some form of a reply.

“Lady Elianna!” called a voice. Someone suddenly plowed right into me, throwing their arms around me.

Stunned, I stood there with my eyes wide open. This woman was one of Lady Sofia’s friends, the same one who had been on that raging horse earlier. She must have still been feeling emotional after the incident.

“Lady Elianna...thank you, truly, thank you! If it hadn’t been for you, I don’t even know what might have happened to me...!” She turned teary-eyed.

“Um...” I tried to soothe her, no less baffled than I’d been a moment ago. “I am glad you’re safe. Uh...the one who really saved you was Jean, though. My servant.”

“Not at all!” the lady shook her head vigorously, the intensity of her gaze enough to make me shrink back. “I heard everything from him. He told me how you commanded him to save me. I...I had the wrong idea about you and kept criticizing you... But despite all that, you still rescued me. I-I was wrong! You truly do regard everything with a just eye. You will make a fitting crown princess!”

I staggered from the shock of her sudden praise. A few short moments ago I’d been admonished for my actions and now I was being complimented. This certainly was an irregular day.

Lady Sofia had a sour look on her face as she scolded the lady clinging to me. “Caroline! You must be too excited after seeing the festivities up close. I do believe you are exaggerating.”

“Not at all.” Lady Caroline had turned pale at Lady Sofia’s ire, but her voice held firm. “When I was about to fall off my horse, I was absolutely terrified. Lady Elianna actually *did* fall off hers. Had the circumstances been any different, either of our lives could have been in danger. You yourself just fell a few days ago, Lady Sofia, so surely you must understand that fear. It’s only natural to be grateful to the

person who rescues you. Should we not rejoice that Lady Elianna has returned unscathed?"

"Well..." Lady Sofia knitted her brows, but her attitude changed to one of feigned politeness when she remembered how much attention had gathered around us. "Yes, it truly is a blessing that you're safe, Lady Elianna," she said, her face straining under the words. Then she promptly took her leave.

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"What are you going to do about this, Rona?!" The pent-up irritation came bursting out of my mouth the moment I returned to my guest quarters.

The maid standing nearby, Rona, wore a look of surprise as she asked, "Did something happen, Lady Sofia?"

"Of course something happened! You said you heard that Lady Elianna is inexperienced with horse riding, yes? That's why I dragged her out on the hunt. But not only did that plan fail to show everyone how disgraceful she is, now she's got Caroline on her side as well! What are you going to do about this?!"

The irritation I felt drove me to return to my old bad habit—chewing on my nails. Doing so always made them look a mess, so I ordinarily restrained myself, but right now I simply couldn't.

Lady Elianna, daughter of Marquess Bernstein. A number of different rumors about her had reached my ear even well before my generation made its societal debut. She was Prince Christopher's fake fiancée, the Bibliophile Princess, the girl who did nothing but read books. Since she didn't proactively participate in high society, she hadn't left much of an impression. The only reputation she had was as a lady with a forgettable presence.

Then, out of nowhere, she had suddenly shot to fame. It began with my father and the other men. "She has a keen eye that can't be underestimated," people would say. I didn't really understand their admiration, but it spread. Next was my mother and the other married women, who soon lavished her with praise, saying, "There's something so fresh and exciting about the color coordination in her dresses." Before long, the number of ladies mimicking her style of dress grew.

After that, she brought a popular book to print, and suddenly everyone was hailing her as a trendsetter. It took no time at all for word of her to spread amongst the people. She was the one who had averted the war. She was an ally to the people in the countryside, a deeply compassionate maiden who outstretched the hand of salvation to all regardless of their wealth or lack thereof. The way the rumors seemed to travel, I'd begun to wonder if they had feet of their own.

When at last I debuted into society and got to see the woman for myself, she really did look like nothing more than a decorative porcelain doll. I saw nothing of the majesty or charisma one would expect from a royal.

The only reason people were mimicking her attire was because of her position as the crown prince's betrothed. If I had been granted that honor, I would have produced far more impressive trends than her. The same went for the Suiran weave; if I had found it first, then I would've been its originator, not her. My beauty and elegance far outclassed a bumbling nitwit like her.

And yet...

"Why...! Why someone like her?!"

A societal debut was something all young noble girls idolized—I had waited for mine for so long. High society was so gorgeous and dazzling it captivated me in an instant. The Mills family was distantly related to a duke family, putting me a head above the rest of the girls in my age group. I was also clearly the most beautiful, seeing how many boys vied for my attention.

What captured my attention the most was the way the royal family seemed to glisten. Specifically, the King and Queen who preserved the wealth of our kingdom. But the same went for their son as well, the wise and great Prince Christopher, who held a kingly air about him despite his young age. He had radiant blond hair and vibrant blue eyes. He was *the* handsome prince. His appearance made him stand out especially, but that face, oh, there wasn't a girl alive who wouldn't fall for him if he smiled at her. Then there was His Majesty's younger brother, Prince Theodore. He had a look in his eyes and an air about him that bespoke wisdom and experience. The man was attractive *and* still single. I longed to join their ranks.

Yet there was already someone else occupying the spot I so desperately wanted, a noble lady with a bizarre nickname. She was always, *always* showing off, wearing the jewel Prince Christopher had given her, acting as if he *belonged* to her.

"...Grr, do something about this, Rona!"

I had completely miscalculated, resulting in Caroline aligning herself with Elianna. My other follower, Cecily, was originally Caroline's friend. It only made sense that she might join Elianna as well. Rona had assured me that now would be a good chance to take her down a peg, but nothing had gone to plan.

"Please, calm down, Lady Sofia," she said, trying to soothe me. I glared daggers back at her.

Any other maid, terrified to receive such a look, would have lowered their eyes. Rona was different. She encouraged me, treated me kinder than my own busy parents. I liked her for that, and

although not much time had passed since we employed her, I had her appointed as my personal maid. But if she couldn't be of any use to me, then there was no meaning to it.

"Everything will be fine," she said, smiling at me. "No other lady is more worthy than you to become a member of the royal family. Your beauty and your status is second to no one. Marquess Bernstein's daughter is there merely for show, and surely Prince Theodore has noticed how dignified you are."

"But Prince Theodore turned his affections to her, not me. I didn't even get any invitations to dance..."

I was supposed to be in a separate class from all the other girls my age, but once Elianna had come to the evening party, suddenly all the men were clamoring around her. Even the married noblewomen had their ears pressed close, hanging on every word as they anticipated the next trend. The fact that no one blinked an eye at me almost made it seem as if...

"Why must I be treated like all of the other noble ladies! Doesn't that seem unjust to you?!"

"Yes," Rona agreed sympathetically, nodding. "You're from the ancient and honorable Mills house, the illustrious daughter of an earl. You stand head and shoulders above everyone else, Lady Sofia. They're all being seduced by Lady Elianna's titles and status. You must be the one to open their eyes."

It was almost as if *I* were the one having my eyes opened. If you peeled away all the Bibliophile Princess's empty adornments, she was just like any other lady. No, she was less than that, I was sure. She'd be buried among the rest of the rabble at the bottom.

"So what should I do, Rona?" Just imagining it made my chest thrum. I grinned and nodded as I listened to Rona's plan, my heart pounding with excitement.

I was going to tear that Bibliophile Princess down from her pedestal.

Chapter 7: The Truth Behind the Old Castle

It was twilight, a curtain of night still hanging over the world. There were eighteen robust men gathered there in the dark. Six had been deployed here from their country, while the rest were rogues they'd collected to bolster their number. They were a mixed, incohesive group, but that had been necessary to avoid being tracked. Had they moved en force with only their countrymen, they would have almost certainly raised suspicion.

There were braziers set up as a means of security that could be seen in the distance. Further beyond that was the manor, radiant light spilling out from its windows.

Security had tightened up these past few days, so their group had been unable to move from their spot in Eidel Forest. They had set loose several injured animals to stir up fuss among the hunting participants, giving themselves an opening for possible attacks. Unfortunately, the Guardian of the Border (Earl Hayden) and the imperial guard had kept a tight watch, so things hadn't gone smoothly for them.

Tonight, however, would be different.

The man acting as leader gazed upon the group, smiling coarsely. "Once the signal comes, we move. You all know who our target is." He had a threatening look in his eyes as he watched them nod.

The group readied their weapons as they waited for the command to come. Their blades glimmered dully amid the darkness.

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Everyone had gone out of their way to warn me, and yet I'd still managed to flub things.

It was the sixth night and another evening party was underway. Tomorrow would hail the end of the festival. A lady approached me as I was getting ready to attend the dance, claiming that Lilia wanted to explore the old castle again. She informed me that she was approaching me on Lilia's behalf, since my cousin insisted that venturing into such a haunted place would be less daunting with me to accompany them. The lady had pleaded so desperately with me that, although I'd hesitated, I had at last relented. The two of us

wound up wandering through the darkness of the old castle together.

Lilia was always brimming with curiosity, so I was sure she wouldn't want to return to the capital until she'd solved the mystery of the Ghost of Eidel. I was torn as to whether I should go along with her until she was satisfied or censure her for her unladylike conduct when I saw her next.

I *did* try my best to be cautious, I assure you, even as I was busy worrying over Lilia. The other noble lady had her maid with us, and there were what I assumed to be guards tailing us. I didn't think there would be any problems. All right, yes, I admit. Given that the lady accompanying me was Lady Sofia, perhaps I should have exercised a bit more caution.

"...Um, Lady Sofia?"

Almost as soon as we entered the old castle she seemed to disappear. I could hear the door shut behind me, a click resounding as it locked. Surprised, I tried to call out to the person on the other side.

A voice trickled in through the cracks in the door. "You're an eyesore, Lady Elianna. Everyone is always singing your praises and complimenting you, but let's face it. You're only getting attention because of your position. I am far more suitable than you to be a member of the royal family and stand beside Prince Theodore and Prince Christopher. I am nothing like you, Bibliophile Princess." Despite her immaturity, there was intense determination in her voice.

"Don't worry," she said. Her laugh sounded innocent and yet slightly malicious. "Here soon, others will come to save you. In the meantime, so you won't feel so afraid, I've prepared another gentleman to keep you company. Please, feel free to get intimate with one another."

She continued chortling, her voice growing fainter and fainter. Soon I could tell that both her maid and the security following us were gone as well.

Oh dear, I thought. Even I knew I was in a pickle.

Although I had once before thought of myself as a fake fiancée, that wasn't the case anymore. I was the prince's true betrothed; our official wedding date had been announced here and abroad. If a scandal were to break out between me and a man other than His Highness, it wouldn't just be my honor at stake. I felt my blood run cold at the thought of being "intimate" with any other man.

What should I do?

As I stood there, frozen, a voice called over. "Now I see. I thought something was off when I was told you'd called for me."

I glanced back to see Lord Irvin standing there with a lantern in his hand.

Seeing my fear, he offered a faint smile. "I'm not going to touch

you. I saw how you kick, I'd be too terrified to try." He shrugged. His voice was practically empty of emotion, despite what the words might imply. I simply nodded. "Now, let's try to find some other way out so we can get back to the party."

I hesitated, but there really was no other way. Plus, it was Lord Irvin who had saved me the other day when I was in trouble. I waffled over whether he was trustworthy or not but ultimately decided I would do as he said.

"Also, you shouldn't be so careless. It's a miracle someone like you managed to become the crown prince's betrothed."

I already felt adequately depressed enough without his criticism.

Now that I thought back, I'd gone through similar harassment many times after we first got engaged, including being locked in rooms and having my dresses stained. Each time either my cousins, Lady Therese, or His Highness had helped me.

Back then, I hadn't realized. This time was different. Now I had decided of my own volition that I wanted to be at Prince Christopher's side. Yet despite that, the moment none of them were with me, I'd slipped up and acted carelessly. This Hunting Festival certainly had taught me much about my own inadequacies.

I was so down in the dumps that I wasn't really watching my feet. The light was dim as well, so I completely missed the step in front of me and fell.

"Hey! Are you okay?"

"Yes..."

I accepted his hand and pulled myself back to my feet, stealing glances over at Lord Irvin.

He breathed a sigh, a bitter smile on his face. "You really aren't what I expected at all. Everyone says you're the lady who proposed avoiding war with us. I pictured you as wise, dignified, and noble. Instead you acted all mopey after the earl admonished you. Then you disposed of that jerk with an unladylike kick to the nether region. And now I find you're defenseless enough that other noble ladies can easily lead you into their traps." Lord Irvin chuckled as if he found it all odd. "I never dreamed the person who saved us would turn out to be an ordinary girl."

I blinked several times as he repeatedly used the word "us."

He seemed to understand my reaction because he flashed a feral grin at me. "That's right, I'm from Maldura, Lady Elianna."

I sucked in a shallow breath. His grip on me tightened. There was something sharp lurking in his gleaming black pupils, there amidst the dim light from the lantern.

"Do even you, the very person who suggested avoiding war with us, find the Maldurans terrifying? We're known for being a

warmongering country, too stupid to return a favor for a favor. A country full of brutes, always targeting Sauslind. If we took you, I wonder if Sauslind would cast aside their humanitarian mask and launch war on us?”

I swallowed and stared back into his eyes.

He exhaled quietly and turned his gaze away, laughing as he let my hand go. “I was only joking.” Then, seeming more like a friendly commoner than a noble, he handed me a handkerchief. “Here.”

Grateful for the gesture, I took it and began wiping away the dust and dirt clinging to my evening gown. “...So you really are a Malduran?” I hadn’t heard anything about a foreign guest attending. Still, if he really was a Malduran, it made sense why his goal was to meet me.

Lord Irvin’s lips quirked slightly. “Half.”

“...Half?”

“My father is Malduran, but my mother is from Sauslind. Not the most conventional pairing, I’m sure, but you can probably imagine the kind of environment I grew up in.”

I pursed my lips. Lord Irvin was certainly correct; Maldura was always eager to launch war, so the country didn’t have the best reputation among Sauslind’s citizens. The feeling was likely mutual on their side as well.

It was easy for me to imagine what kind of position that would put his parents in, and subsequently how he must have been raised. “...Was it a political arrangement?”

“Nope. They just happened to meet and fall in love. I heard the story so many times growing up it was almost nauseating.” His face screwed up, making the story seem all the more genuine. Then he sighed. “My father, well, he had enough status that the people around him criticized him for it, but apparently it wasn’t too big of a deal. I did hear my mom was driven from her homeland, though. She was born and raised here in this country and yet her own people treated her worse than they treated Maldurans.”

“...”

I suspected that it was precisely *because* she was from Sauslind that all the people here condemned her for giving her heart to the enemy. Perhaps for some, loving their country so fiercely meant rejecting their own people if their values didn’t fall in line.

Lord Irvin gave a lopsided, sarcastic smile. “Well, I’m sure the fault probably lies with my father. He’s the one who involved himself with a woman without any consideration for their circumstances or the consequences. Anyway, that discussion you all had about Sauslind’s history before was quite interesting.”

He must have been listening in on my conversation with Lady

Anna the other day.

There was some sincerity in his eyes despite his mocking grin. "Since I carry the blood of both countries in my veins, I feel I hold both of their histories on my shoulders. I have no interest in romanticizing or trying to conceal the sins they've committed. Maldura has waged war on Sauslind numerous times in the past. That's a fact. I also know that Sauslind views Maldura as a nation of barbarians. That's why I was so surprised when I heard about how you suggested Sauslind lend us aid."

There was something earnest and bright about the way he smiled. "You have my thanks, Lady Elianna. It's because of your proposal that we were able to avoid war with my mother's homeland. The earl said your proposals were idealistic and nothing more than fantastical dreams, but I don't see the problem with that. If the ruler at the top of a country doesn't pursue ideals, then where would the country go instead?"

My heart rang with surprise.

His vivid eyes had enraptured mine. "It's a different story if those ideals are misguided, of course, but the people around you haven't complained about that, have they? That was why they decided to use your proposal, and that's why the people approve of you. Hold your head high. You're the prince's betrothed, aren't you?"

...I do believe he's trying to reassure me right now. Isn't he?

My lips naturally softened. "Thank you."

Lord Irvin's mood seemed to change suddenly after that. He sent a sharp glare into the darkness behind me. "Now, it's about time you two stop glowering at each other and come out already."

Surprised, I turned back to peer through the dark and found Jean standing there alongside another young man I had never seen before. At least, I suspected it was accurate to call him a man? He certainly wore the clothes and had the body shape of a gentleman, with a sword hanging from his side. However, he also had long, flowing snow white hair that almost looked as if it had been dyed. There was something feminine about it that made me wonder if it might not be equally appropriate to call him a woman.

At any rate, the man had a stern look on his face as he glared at Lord Irvin. "You brainless idiot, I told you numerous times not to take any actions that deviated from our plan."

"Eh, I don't see the harm. After all, I was able to speak with Lady Elianna thanks to all of this. She had so much security around her as the prince's betrothed, I was at my wit's end for how to approach her," he said casually before turning his gaze to me. "This is your 'Ghost of Eidel,' by the way. He's my servant, but as you can see, he stands out. I told him to hide, and that's how he got mistaken for a

ghost.” Lord Irvin chuckled at the absurdity of it. His mirth only prompted his servant to narrow his eyes even further. For being so beautiful, he certainly was an imposing man.

Jean was the same as he always was, half-exasperated as he said, “M'lady, why do you enjoy getting yourself locked in places so much?”

Excuse me, it's not as if I enjoy doing this.

Jean then casually approached, earning him a sharp look from Lord Irvin. The two had met before, but I realized I'd never actually introduced them. “This is my manservant, Jean.”

Both Lord Irvin and his servant turned to me with grim looks in their eyes. “Manservant? You must be joking.”

I tilted my head in confusion, but as soon as I did, an unusual noise resounded from a distant room. There was a rumble, as if some large piece of furniture had toppled over, then a shattering sound like glass breaking, followed by a woman's voice barking in reproach. At the very same time, numerous silhouettes emerged from the shadows. I could see their blades gleaming sharply through the darkness.

Lord Irvin's servant quickly whipped out his sword, and a sudden fight broke out as one of the shadows came hurtling toward him. It was all so fast that I found myself sucking in a breath, unable to even cry out. Jean immediately slipped me under his arm like a piece of luggage and swiftly hauled us out of there.

Lord Irvin, who was wearing his evening attire and therefore unequipped for battle, evaded the attacks as he cried out, “Rei! My sword?!”

“I have no idea. You're the one who wandered out into the middle of these thugs like an idiot, figure it out yourself!”

“Ah yes, you sure are a tender-hearted servant, aren't you?!”

As the two engaged in their strange conversation, sidestepping any oncoming swings of their enemies' blades, our group was driven into another room. What we saw inside made all the breath rush out of my lungs.

Moonlight spilled in through the slatted shutters of a window, illuminating several silhouettes that were present. A lantern had fallen to the ground, smashed, and a bookcase had toppled over, leaving tomes strewn about the floor. The people trampling all over them must have been in league with the other intruders we encountered. One of them had hold of a pale Lady Anna, pinning her arms behind her back.

I tried to call out to her, but Jean stifled my voice with his hand. I knew why when I heard the intruder's next words.

“Tch. Why are there two women here? There was only supposed to be one. We don't need this many. Which one of you is Elianna

Bernstein?"

Their target was me. Lady Anna did her utmost to send a pleading look my way, so I nodded back at her. I understood exactly what she was trying to say. No one had to tell me who these men were. It was obvious with just one glance. It almost felt ceremonial, as if I were a priest letting the divine speak through me. That thought continued to linger in my mind even as Jean lifted his hand from my mouth.

"So you men are enemies of humanity," I said.

Jean immediately sunk to his knees, defeated. Even the other thugs in the room looked completely dumbfounded for a moment, as if the tension in the air had momentarily slipped away.

I paid that no heed, however, feeling more anger at the sight in front of me than I had ever felt before. Admittedly, the way they were manhandling Lady Anna was utterly unforgivable, but even worse than that, what kind of barbarian tramples books?!

Lady Anna courageously spoke up, drawing the men's attention, "I'm Elianna Bernstein. Who are you?! State your business!"

We could already guess the answer; we were both present when Lord Sieg, captain of the imperial guard, warned us to be cautious. Lady Anna must have been indirectly keeping an eye out for me as well, I suspected. She might have surmised that Lady Sofia would try to ruin my reputation by setting things up to make it look as if I were meeting secretly with another man. Thus, she had come ahead of anyone else to try to help me, which was when these enemies of humanity captured her. Perhaps that was it.

The surprised look slipped away from the face of the man who had seized Lady Anna. He let out a derisive snort of laughter and said, "You wanna know what we're doing, huh? Creating a sensational scandal, that's what. It'll be one hell of a discovery—the prince of Maldura and the betrothed of Sauslind's crown prince found dead where they were secretly meeting. People will wonder which country is responsible. This will cause far more of a stir than attacking the king's younger brother. Tensions will mount again between the nations."

Prince of Maldura?

Shock registered in both my eyes and Lady Anna's as we followed the man's gaze to Lord Irvin. He smiled boldly, standing stock still as he let out a mocking laugh at the man's words. "So *that* is your objective, huh? You figure that by staging it to look like Maldura's prince was killed by someone from Sauslind, you can use that as a pretext for going to war with them. At the same time, Sauslind will be filled with righteous indignation; Lady Elianna has gained a reputation for being the one responsible for avoiding hostilities, after all.

"Honestly," he scoffed. There was more exasperation in his voice

than there was anger. "I thought there was something suspicious slinking around in the woods, but I didn't realize you were here for me. Maldura's militant party certainly is infested with brainless idiots. I know our country isn't known for its geniuses, but not even being able to recognize Lady Elianna's face is rather pathetic. I'm not trying to tell you what to do, but couldn't they have found people with a bit more intelligence than you lot? It's almost embarrassing to call us countrymen."

Beside me, Jean mumbled, "He's almost as good as you when it comes to making fun of people."

Come now, I don't "make fun" of people. Besides, I haven't been this angry at someone in a long time.

The man who seemed to be in charge of this whole attack wrinkled his face. "Half of the blood you carry is from Sauslind. Don't call yourself my 'countryman,' not even as a joke. Makes my skin crawl."

Lord Irvin merely shrugged, as though he was accustomed to such retorts. Maldura was a bit isolationist in nature, so I had no idea what their internal circumstances were, but the royal family was said to have five princes. That meant he was one of them, right?

The leader gave a cruel smile. He seemed certain that they had the advantage now. "A prince with the blood of Sauslind running through his veins is a stain on the royal family. You would've never been any use to our country any place else. You can feel honored that at least your death serves some purpose here at the end."

"Fool," said Lord Irvin in a low voice, clicking his tongue. "You refuse to recognize other people. It's because you lot are so bullheaded that Maldura continues to be treated as a barbaric nation full of nitwits. Why don't you understand that *you* are the ones harming our country's reputation? I bet you're all the third prince's stooges. Disgraceful, shaming yourself by coming all the way to a foreign country over a family feud."

The look of humiliation was so plain on the man's face that even I noticed it. "You're useless to Maldura!" He gave a signal and the men in the area started toward us with their swords.

Lord Irvin's servant stepped in front of him, prepared to engage in battle. But then, suddenly, a number of silhouettes appeared in the shadows behind the men. In an instant they rendered the intruders unconscious. More of their number appeared behind us as well, surrounding us. It all happened in the blink of an eye. Only one was left—the man holding Lady Anna captive.

"Wh-Wha..." The scene was so dramatic that it struck the man speechless.

Lord Irvin, on the other hand, remained perfectly composed as if

he'd foreseen this outcome. He let out a short whistle.

Then, a familiar voice suddenly reverberated. "I was only gone for a short time, yet look how many insects crawled their way to the surface."

I looked back, eyes wide with surprise.

His blond hair shone through the darkness, his eyes as clear as the cloudless blue sky. There was a commanding presence to his handsome face, and even his radiant smile was the same as always, kindly turned my way. "I'm home, Eli."



Was I dreaming? There was no way Prince Christopher could be *here*. He was off attending some ceremony in another country. If this really was a dream, was I still supposed to say “Welcome home”? I stood there, frozen.

His Highness approached, eyes watching me. The smile on his face looked far too sweet and out of place given our circumstances. “Aren’t you going to welcome me back home, Eli?”

My lips trembled as I opened my mouth, but we were interrupted when Lady Anna let out a small cry. I snapped back into focus and turned my head. The man, who had quite literally dug his own grave, was now using Lady Anna as a shield as he raved and ranted.

His real target was me. I couldn’t allow Lady Anna to be put in danger any longer. Resolved, I stepped forward. The moment I did, His Highness mumbled something, stretching his hand out to cover my eyes.

“She doesn’t seem to be involved,” he said. “Jean.”

I thought I heard him calling my manservant’s name as well. A moment later, I could hear what sounded like the man crying out before crumpling to the floor. There was something more important than that on my mind right now, though. It might be considered immodest for me to notice, but the heat from His Highness’s hand made it clear that this was no dream.

Once he dropped his hand, I was greeted by his gentle gaze. The sight was so vivid it seemed to etch itself into my heart.

“Your Highness, why...are you here?”

“How could I not hasten home when I heard you were in danger?” He smiled at me, still clad in his traveling garments, part of his patrol unit disguise peeking out from beneath his cloak. He was right; his attire certainly did give the impression that he’d hurried here.

His eyes went cold as he turned them on Lord Irvin. “Besides, I heard from a little bird that we had an unofficial foreign guest here. As the prince, it’s my duty to make him feel welcome, is it not?”

“Hah.” I heard an exasperated voice trickle in from the door. Prince Theodore was there, accompanied by Lord Sieg and Earl Hayden.

By the time I realized what was going on, Lord Glen and his men had already rounded up the thugs, and the area was now bustling with excitement. I was relieved to see Lady Anna was all right, but those silhouettes we had seen dancing in the shadows before, the ones who had saved us, were gone. I couldn’t help wondering who they were or where they’d gone.

“Things would have gotten complicated if we explained everything to you, so my brother carefully waited for the most

opportune time to conduct this meeting. How on earth did you manage to sniff out our plans?" Prince Theodore asked.

"I don't understand, Uncle. What was *your* intention in having Eli meet him in secret without my knowledge?" The prince had his usual smile plastered on his face, but there was something in the air around him that made him seem distinctly...angry.

Prince Theodore, seeming to have sensed it as well, sighed. "His mother passed away last year, so he came to visit Eidel in her stead. The young lady's name was Sylvia Slade."

All of our gazes turned to Lord Irvin, who merely shrugged. "She was far too old to be called a 'young lady' anymore."

It felt as if so many pieces of the puzzle had come together, but there was still something missing. Something making it obscure, confusing.

Once Lady Anna was free of her captor and her father had confirmed that she was safe, she approached me to see how I was doing. I took the opportunity to ask, "Lady Anna, are you uninjured?" I supposed it was the blood of the earl in her that gave her the courage to act as my decoy as she had.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said, though for some reason she regarded Jean with a look of fear in her eyes.

Lord Irvin snickered mockingly for some reason. "So his real master is the prince, huh?"

I tilted my head questioningly, but then Prince Christopher slipped his cloak around me and pulled me close. He was being far more forceful than he'd ever been before. I got the impression he was irritated about something. "Really, inconceivable. You would have *my* Eli meet secretly with some other man? I don't care if this man is the prince of another country, you're telling me she had her life targeted because of some other country's—some other family's—feud? Utterly inconceivable, Uncle." His anger was cold, like ice.

Prince Theodore tried to soothe his anger. "Ahh, just to be clear, those thugs were targeting me at first. I noticed their threatening presence during the middle of our hunts several times. Plus, Eli had your Shadow with her, and I was keeping an eye on her, too."

When he tried to protest further, Lord Sieg gently intervened. "Why don't we go somewhere else before discussing this further? It seems everyone has caught wind of the uproar here."

His Highness gave a small sigh, his irritation seeming to drain out with it. His demeanor took a sudden turn as he peered down at me with a smile on his face. "Can you walk, Eli? Shall I carry you?"

"Oh, I can walk."

And in fact, could you stop holding your arms around me like you're about to pick me up anyway? It's so embarrassing having other people

watch like this.

His Highness looked a bit discontent, but he kept his hand around me the entire time as we made our way to the exit of the old castle. Before we left, he gave some orders to Lord Glen and the others. Their faces were riddled with exhaustion. Even Lord Sieg looked at them all sympathetically as he said, "Good work, everyone. We'll make sure you're given exceptional compensation for this."

"...Rather than money, I'd like to apply for some special leave to restore some mental tranquility," muttered Lord Glen.

"Ahh... Well, we can consider that. Still, the result will probably be the same, Glen, whether Alex calls you in for cleanup or His Highness uses you for target practice— I mean, calls you in for bodyguard duty."

"Where's my mental tranquility...?" The sorrowful sound of Glen's voice as he mumbled to himself lingered in my mind long after.

People were clamoring in confusion outside the old castle— guards, security, and nobles who'd been enjoying the evening festivities. The prince had returned to the country without anyone noticing, but word of intruders had apparently spread and everyone was now scrutinizing anyone who came out of the castle. Thus, they were exceptionally surprised when they saw His Highness.

One of the ladies in the crowd rushed over to us. "Miss Eli!" It was my cousin, Lilia. Her expression was heavy with emotion as she checked to make sure I was all right. Then, completely ignoring that the prince was beside me, she scolded me quietly. "Lady Sofia's flunkies suddenly held me up, so I thought something suspicious was going on. Didn't I tell you to be careful? Are your ears there for decoration or do they actually work? I couldn't find you. Then weird rumors started flying around... Lady Anna said she'd go warn you as to what was going on since I couldn't, so I entrusted the matter to her, but how in the world did it turn out like this?!"

Lilia, that hurts. I am already reflecting on my actions, so could you please stop pinching my ears and cheeks and stretching them? Besides, I can't even respond to you when you're doing this.

His Highness chuckled before stepping in to stop her. "Lady Lilia, someone lured Eli into the castle and trapped her there. The fact that thugs then infiltrated the building shows someone was clearly targeting her. Who was the one who broadcast the news that she was there in the first place?"

His words were quiet, but it was clear that the people pressed in on us had heard him. Their gazes all turned toward a single lady. Even in the darkness, I could see Lady Sofia's face pale and her body tremble.

"I-I...I didn't..."

Even I had to feel some sympathy for her. Given her age, she was most likely just being a bit reckless—no, perhaps it was more accurate to say her actions were driven by a single, intense desire. She could never have imagined that her petty trickery would overlap with an intruder's attack. If the prince was right and she had been after my life, then she wouldn't have gone out of her way to reveal herself as the culprit to me.

I hesitated before opening my mouth to speak, but before I could, someone else's cheerful voice beat me to it. "Excuse me, make way, people." Lord Alan squeezed through the crowd, accompanied by security personnel who were dragging a bound woman along with them.

"Rona...!" Lady Sofia cried out in surprise. This was her personal maid, the very one who had led us through the old castle.

Lord Alan began to explain, his tone seeming detached and light-hearted. "Uh, well, Lady Sofia here isn't connected to the thugs. The other day it was suspected that someone had tampered with Lady Elianna's horse, so I looked into it. At the same time, we also suspected that someone connected to their group had infiltrated our ranks, so Prince Theodore was keeping an eye out for anyone or anything suspicious around Lady Elianna.

"At first we suspected Lady Sofia, but she wasn't being sneaky enough for it to be her. We were stumped. Then we realized someone was using her as a cover and it was actually her maid who was acting suspiciously. The maid seems to be the one who enticed Lady Sofia and used her. After Lady Elianna was locked in the old castle, we found her relaying the news to the thugs and apprehended her."

"No, it can't be..." Lady Sofia went limp, slumping to her knees. Perhaps she really had trusted her maid.

Although Lord Alan said the maid was responsible for what had happened, it didn't change the fact that Lady Sofia and her family were the ones who'd employed the woman. That was their mistake, and suspicions toward Lady Sofia would no doubt remain.

Prince Christopher gave his orders to Lord Alan and the other security personnel present. I turned to Lilia and asked her to look after Lady Sofia.

She looked back at me, anger unmistakable. "And why, pray tell, do you feel the need to worry over *her*? If you'd made even one misstep, your life would have been in danger. You nearly had your reputation ruined over the rumors she was trying to start. Do you understand that?"

"But I do feel there were some ways in which I could have conducted myself better as well," I started to say.

Lilia lifted her brows in disbelief. "Enough! It doesn't take a

genius to figure out the only reason an air-head like you is safe is because you have people protecting you. But you pretend not to notice and instead internalize the blame rather than direct it where it really belongs. People who try to hurt you over their own false narratives don't deserve your sympathy!" Even as she huffed in anger, Lilia still honored my request and stomped off toward Lady Sofia. It was probably best I not inform her that they'd used her name to call me out to the old castle to begin with.

There were very few who knew Lord Irvin's true identity and the nature of his unofficial visit. Since Maldura's militant political party had a hand in the incident, there was a high likelihood that word of it all would be swept under the rug. This would result in suspicions turning toward Lady Sofia and her family, casting a dark shadow over the rest of her life. I couldn't help but feel sorry for her. There was a reason the words "youthful indiscretion" existed, and it was to describe the foolish thing Lady Sofia had done.

"Eli?"

I felt a jolt run down my spine. This was a sensation I had experienced before, I was sure.

Beside me, His Highness was smiling, but there was something terrifying and impregnable about it. "I agree with Lady Lilia. I know quite well what you're like, but you should be a bit more cautious. Men and women are different. You can't allow people to start rumors about you being with other men, all right?" His words and smile seemed so kind, but why was it the words seemed so threatening?

I nodded vigorously either way. Then Prince Theodore called us to gather up with everyone else in the manor.

Chapter 8: Speaking from the Heart

The conversation was largely an explanation, namely of the circumstances around His Highness's return. He did attend the foreign ceremony but had refused to participate in the evening celebration. Instead, he'd headed straight back for Sauslind. I was pretty sure, given the distance, that meant he and his men had ridden day and night to get here in time, but...

"It wasn't a problem." He gave me a beaming smile, but I caught a glimpse of exhaustion and fatigue on the faces of Lord Glen and the other imperial guards. Considering how much they had deviated from their original plan, there would be much to deal with in the aftermath as well. I could already imagine a vein bulging in anger on Lord Alexei's forehead.

"What is most important is that the two of you are safe, Lady Elianna, Lady Anna." Duchess Kreis was being most accommodating, in part as an apology for the incompetence shown by the distantly related Count Mills family.

I let out a small breath before gazing back at her. "Are you acquainted with Lady Sylvia Slade?" It would have been difficult for them to introduce Lord Irvin as the son of an old friend were that not the case.

In the corner, Lord Irvin and his servant looked disquieted by the question. Before the duchess could answer, he stepped in. "I was the one who made an unreasonable demand."

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Lady Sylvia Slade was the daughter of the duke family that governed the Eidel Domain. Just as her mother before her, she was idolized for her brilliance and adored by the people, almost like a princess. She loved this land she was born to and took a vested interest in her people's everyday lives. She rejoiced in the season's harvests with them and engaged them amicably in conversation. As a result, the people revered her.

But then it was discovered that the duke's family had plotted rebellion against the royal house and that they had even formed an alliance with Maldura—the very warmongering nation always waiting to jump Sauslind at any sign of vulnerability. To add insult to injury, the people found out their esteemed princess was in love with

someone from the enemy's side. They felt as if they'd been sold out, as if she had betrayed all the affection they'd held for her. Rage and disappointment swelled. After that, they decided to erase her existence entirely, claiming their beloved princess had perished and was nowhere to be found any longer.

"My father, well, the current king of Maldura, that is," Lord Irvin went on to say, "was still just a prince at the time. He was in a similar position to the one I am in now. He was trying to hunt down information on Maldura's internal discord when he met my mother. So we're clear, I heard he was politically opposed to those planning to invade."

Still, it was a fact there *were* those within Maldura with designs on invading Sauslind. Just like the thugs this time.

In the corner of the room, Earl Hayden wore a grim expression, looking more alarmed than anyone else present. Lord Irvin shrugged lightly, as if he sensed the unease. "My mother told me she didn't have any regrets for the way she'd lived her life, but I still felt like she wanted to return to the place she was born. Lady Kreis had been close to my mother since long ago, so I decided to ask her for a favor. I was interested in seeing what kind of person Lady Elianna is, but...I do feel bad she got wrapped up in our internal affairs." Though his tone sounded casual, there was something earnest in his voice.

Prince Christopher's lips may have been smiling, but his eyes were not. His very presence seemed to emanate a chill as he listened.

I whispered quietly, "Ladybird Sylvia."

Everyone—not just the prince—turned to me in surprise.

My eyes were focused on the handkerchief Lord Irvin had given me before, the one I hadn't yet returned. I hadn't noticed in the dim light, but as I listened to his story, I remembered the feel of the embroidery in my fingers and all the pieces snapped into place. "Prince Theodore, you said someone from within realized Duke Slade's treachery and reported it. If I'm not mistaken, the person who did that was the man's own daughter, Lady Sylvia, was it not?"

Lord Hayden stared at me in shock.

Prince Theodore seemed momentarily taken aback by my conjecture, but he soon gave a pained smile and nodded. "Yes, she reported the only family member she had, her own father, for his crimes. At the same time, she was branded as the daughter of a traitor, so her actions couldn't be recognized publicly. Even the royal family had no choice but to keep quiet."

She was the daughter of a family that had nearly rebelled and thrown Sauslind into the flames of war. It didn't matter whether her actions were just; the royal family must not have been in a position where they could easily acknowledge what she'd done.

After a brief moment of silence, I turned my gaze to Lord Irvin. "Was Lady Sylvia always fond of this embroidery?"

"...Yes. It's an insect, right? I would have expected a flower or her family crest. I thought it weird, but when I asked her, she brushed me off saying "This is my heart."" He laughed, almost as if he were telling a joke, but I gave him a serious nod all the same. Whether he knew it or not, this *was* her heart.

"This insect is called a ladybird. According to Kenneth Blood, author of *The World at Our Feet*, an insectopedia, ladybirds are known for only approaching a specific type of flower. The Eidel Domain is named after a small white flower, called the Eidel flower, which blooms all across the land in the spring. They are primarily pollinated by ladybirds, given that the insect expresses no interest in any other flowers. This has led plant researchers to claim that the flower is now reliant on ladybirds for pollination. Thus, the insect has come to be known by another name: the Flower Protector." I gently stroked my hand over the handkerchief.

This woman, who had signed her name as Ladybird Sylvia, had been driven from the very land where she was born, was detested by the people she loved, and had had her existence completely erased. This embroidery truly was her heart. No matter where she went, even if she was driven away from her homeland, she was still determined to protect it. She had refused to see it turned into a battlefield. Just like the ladybird insect that protected the Eidel flower.

I had never seen this woman before or met her, yet her story gave me strength. I gripped the fabric tightly in my hand and stood, striding over to Earl Hayden. "My lord, even if you might call it naive, I still cannot choose to answer violence with violence. I also won't use military strength to defend our country. If this peace we have now was cultivated through the wars and numerous sacrifices of our ancestors, then the duty of those of us living today is not to continue that pattern of death but to preserve what they fought to achieve. That is my position."

His brow stiffly furrowed. "Do you still plan to say that, even if your life is targeted again in the future just as it was this time?"

"Yes, I'll say the same thing each and every time."

I knew what the fear of watching an attack unfold right before your eyes was like now. I was so shocked at what I'd seen happening in front of me that I'd been emotionally paralyzed. Now I felt relieved, knowing I was safe. If something had happened to me, I might never have seen His Highness, my family, my friends, or my beloved books ever again. Even so...

"I will nip war in the bud no matter how many times it grows back, until people cease holding such ill ambitions in their hearts. If

we can maintain the peace with Maldura and foster positive relations with them as a neighboring country, then the people of Edea will have no need to fear invasion. No one should face persecution for falling in love with someone from another country. Not in Sauslind.”

Lady Sylvia loved someone from Maldura and had been shunned for it. What made that level of discrimination any different from the hate those thugs had spewed at Lord Irvin?

“You’re proposing friendship with Maldura?” the earl asked.

“I know it will be difficult.”

Hearing how the people of the Eidel Domain had emotionally revolted against Lady Sylvia made me certain it would be no simple matter. That was especially true given Edea’s history as a border region. Those at the center of the government and even people across the country might oppose me on this. I also had no idea what position Maldura would take either. These were entirely my personal feelings. Nonetheless, I felt empowered by the prince’s supportive gaze. *Just be yourself.*

“No matter how steep or long that road is, we will never reach it if we don’t take the first step. Lady Sylvia did not rely on military might to protect her home. Men are prone to relying on power, mistakenly taking pride in themselves for it. From a woman’s point of view, it’s no different than appointing a petulant child drunk on power to a position of leadership. We all should learn from the example of women like Lady Sylvia.”

Earl Hayden’s eyes went wide. Surprise was etched on his face, almost as if I’d slapped him, but then suddenly a rumble came from deep within his throat. It was a laugh, one he couldn’t quite stifle before it came spilling out.

I recoiled, taken aback by his reaction. Had I really said anything laughable? This was Earl Hayden we were talking about. Sober, honest, and incredibly formal—humor was not exactly in his character. Everyone else in the room looked on in bemusement.

Once his mirth faded, the earl turned his earnest gaze back to me and said, “It is naive. That’s the idealistic talk of someone caught up in dreams.” His voice was harsh, admonishing, but he kept going. “Your words are full of youth and promise. They make Sauslind’s future look bright.” There was a whoosh as he smoothly bent a knee in front of me. “Lady Elianna Bernstein, as long as you are here, as long as your ideals take root and begin to grow, I can believe our country and our lands will not be turned into a battlefield. I, Lowe Hayden, pledge my fealty to both you and the crown prince who has chosen you as his betrothed.”

Strength emanated from every word he spoke. I was so taken aback that I was frozen in place. Prince Christopher placed a hand

against my back, prompting me to look up into his kind blue eyes. “Earl Hayden, your loyalty is like divine protection from the gods. I swear you won’t regret the decision you’ve made here.”

After exchanging glances, Earl Hayden bowed his head low once again. A gentle atmosphere permeated the air, interrupted only when Lord Irvin spoke up.

“Now, why don’t I lay everything out on the table for everyone.” He left his seat and came over to stand in front of the prince and me. “The primary reason for my unofficial visit was to see my late mother’s homeland, but I also wanted to get an advanced look.”

“What do you mean by that?” His Highness smiled, but his voice was somewhat cold.

Lord Irvin must have assumed it was merely one of the prince’s quirks. The edges of his lips quirked. “The second prince, the next rightful king, wanted me to see if there was anyone we could trust in Sauslind’s political interior to foster good relations between us. By meeting Lady Elianna, I thought I could get a feel for what kind of person you are, Crown Prince.”

The prince kept his smile as he replied, “And you decided to start these attempts of forming an alliance by getting us wrapped up in your political infighting over the Malduran crown?”

“At the very least, those supporting the second prince’s claim, myself included, are not the ones who want to war with Sauslind.”

“We have plenty of other politically viable options at our disposal besides your second prince and his supporters,” said His Highness. “So many to choose between...”

“Are you challenging me to demonstrate why supporting us would benefit you? As the rumors say, you’re shrewder than you look,” said Lord Irvin.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Just so you know, I didn’t lay a hand on Lady Elianna.”

“Oh, I’m not at all worried about the fact you nearly started a scandal with my fiancée.” He still had that grin plastered on his face, but I’d felt chills standing beside him for a while now.

Lord Irvin ground his teeth together, huffing under his breath. “You’re just being petty now...”

Prince Theodore gave a bitter smile as he brought the conversation to a close and redirected the course of their talks.

I was only released from all the dizzying chaos of conversation when his Highness asked that we be excused. He accompanied me back to the guest quarters. On our way, I noticed a nervous energy that seemed to fill the grounds in the wake of the thugs’ intrusion and His Highness’s sudden return.

Three of my household maids, who had waited without word of what had happened, wore looks of relief the moment they spotted me. Even Selma was no exception; her expression relaxed as soon as she saw my face. I felt my own tension begin to fade.

Annie and the others quickly helped His Highness remove his overcoat and outerwear. He directed a kind smile my way. "Now, Eli, there's nothing more for you to worry about. Take the rest of today to relax."

His words brought me back to my senses. I peered over my shoulder back at the prince and immediately returned to his side, pinching the hem of his travel tunic between my fingers. "Your Highness, um..." I stared back into his eyes as he tilted his head, feeling the emotions I'd been holding within suddenly rage up like a torrent.

"Eli?" he prompted again.

I opened my mouth to speak but then glanced behind me. "...Um, I'd like you to leave us for a bit." Selma narrowed her eyes and seemed poised to chide me for my indiscretion, but I quickly added, "Please." She seemed to begrudgingly accept it with a sigh.

Once it was just the two of us, the prince finally spoke up in a concerned voice and asked again, "Eli? Is something wrong?" Then, in a more serious tone, he asked, "Something you don't want other people to hear...?"

"No," I said quickly, shaking my head. His eyes, clear and blue, seemed to suck me in like a vacuum. My emotions welled up, and I managed to push away my reservations—that the prince might find me improper for what I was about to do—and threw myself against his chest.



My heart throbbed when he flinched under my touch, and immediately regret began to sink in. It was gone almost as quickly as it appeared; I felt so propelled by a desperate desire to be close to him that my actions preceded my thoughts.

I'd felt such fear when Lady Sofia tricked me and locked me in that old castle, suggesting I "get intimate" with another man. The first thing that popped into my head at the time was, *I don't want to be intimate with anyone but His Highness!* The only person I wanted to call my name, to touch me, was the prince.

"Your Highness..."

I had no idea how to convey these emotions in words. I could feel his heartbeat drumming right in front of me. Normally, I'd turn red and become flustered in this situation, but the sound of his pulse was so precious, so soothing—nothing else seemed to matter.

Maybe I was so dull-witted that the true terror at having my life targeted had only now caught up with me. Maybe it was the sound of the prince's heartbeat in my ear that finally allowed me to relax.

Suddenly, I recalled what the other married women had told me before. "You could stand to be a bit more demanding. Men enjoy entertaining a lady's personal requests." I wasn't accustomed to making such requests, so I wasn't sure how to go about this. Even so, the emotions bubbling up within compelled me to try.

"I really..."

It was the first time I had ever felt like crying for no reason. Unbelievable, I was *the* Bibliophile Princess and yet the mere thought of voicing my own feelings brought me to tears.

"I really missed you, Your Highness..."

"Eli..." His voice sounded slightly hoarse as he called my name. I clung even closer to him, all the more determined for us not to be apart. As one in charge of a country and its people, it was a grave error to neglect one's official duties. There was no guarantee he wouldn't face repercussions over this incident. Even so, the one thing I did know above all else was that my heart filled with a joy that overshadowed obligation.

If the prince hadn't come when he did, I had no idea what might have become of me. The whole country might have been dragged into a war over me. Fear seized me at the thought. What meant more to me than anything, however, was what the prince had done for me. He was the pride of Sauslind, a perfect, flawless man that never showed a glimpse of weakness to anyone, and he'd thrown it all away for me. More than feeling guilty, I was so unbelievably happy.

So I tried expressing that as best I could. "Thank you for...coming to save me... Your Highness... Prince Christopher."

“...Ah.” In an instant his arms wrapped so tightly around me it was almost hard to breathe. It took me by surprise; it was more forceful than anything I had felt from him before. I was so overjoyed that my heart instantly heated up.

“Eli... Elianna...” He put even more strength in his arms, fingers digging into the fabric at the back of my dress. I struggled to squeeze him back, to show how much I didn’t want us to be apart either. “You’re...you’re safe... I’m so...” His feelings didn’t quite make it out into words, but feeling the heat from his hand and seeing how he struggled to breathe made my chest tighten.

If only I’d been more dependable...

If only I could have carried out my duties as his proxy without causing him undue worry. If only I was the type of fiancée that gave no openings for people to take advantage of, the kind with grace and decorum.

“Your Highness,” I started, “I’m still not there yet, but I swear one day I will become a suitable bride for you. One day I will be someone the royal family can be proud to call one of their own, someone more poised... It may take time, but...I will do everything I can to get there.”

The strength in his arms waned. It was as if the energy in the air had deflated a bit. He pulled himself up, eyes peering down at me unblinkingly. “Eli, I know you well enough to know you’re being serious when you say that, but... Well...” He let out a breath, sounding almost discouraged, his smile turning bitter. “You don’t seem to realize it, but everything you say is always for the greater good of our people. There is no one better suited for the position of crown princess than you. I was pretty sure I’d made that clear to you before and you understood.”

Perplexed, I blinked several times. By “before,” was he referring to what happened in the spring? The whole scene before that seemed like it could have been a stage production?

His blue eyes were so gentle as they gazed at me they seemed to wash away any anxiety I felt. “Besides, Eli, you showed more poise than anyone else I know just moments ago. That exchange you had with Earl Hayden really resonated, and you were dauntless as you defended your position. I was proud. You captivated me.”

I could feel my cheeks flush.

His Highness chuckled. “Besides, do you really think just anyone can make that man bend a knee and swear fealty? That would be an impossible feat for any ordinary lady. It’s thanks to you that I can fulfill my role as crown prince.” He smiled as he spoke, but there was something lonely in his expression.

Immediately I replied, “The reason I can give it my all—that I

even want to try—is because I’m with you, Prince Christopher. I don’t do this for anyone else. It’s for you, so I can be with you, that’s why I want to walk by your side as an equal.”

His eyes went wide.

The only world I had ever known was books, and yet now the one responsible for making me worry, overthink, and feel depressed over my own inadequacies was this man before me. He was also the reason I wanted to be more useful and proper. It was all so I could stay by his side.

My mouth trembled as I opened it to speak further, but his hoarse voice cut me short. “Sorry, Eli... I can’t handle it anymore.”

I was only confused for a split second, for in the next his hand was at the back of my head, his lips pressing over mine as if to stop me from breathing. “Mm...!” My voice was soon washed away by his intensity. I could feel his hot breath against my lips, his tongue roughly pressing its way inside. Our breathing, the heat, the passion—it all coalesced together and washed over us, like a violent tsunami.

I clutched at the front of the prince’s tunic. This kiss was far different from any we had shared before, and the excitement I felt superseded my surprise. His feelings were so overwhelming. It was like I was being toyed with, left dizzy as he stole my breath.

Being unaccustomed to this, I couldn’t withstand the intensity for long. The prince seemed to sense my knees were losing their strength because he slipped an arm around my waist to give me support. The warmth of his breath still lingered on my lips when we parted, but the cold air that caressed them moments later sent a chill through me. Almost immediately, I was left gasping for air, unsure of whether the drumming in my ears was my own heartbeat or the prince’s.

I’d closed my eyes at some point, and when I opened them, he suddenly lifted me into the air. For a moment, I was confused as to why I was floating. I only realized what had happened after he deposited me onto a nearby sofa. I watched his eyes, so close and so filled with passion, and blinked a few times. *Is it my imagination or is that the ceiling behind him...?*

“Eli, I want to make sure you’re all right.” He gazed at me so endearingly, and I felt my chest squeeze. Those blue eyes were closing in and I followed their invitation to close my own.

A sudden knock resounded, causing me to jump with surprise. It was soon followed by the echo of Selma’s admonishing voice booming from the other side. “My lady, the prince just barely returned. He must be exhausted. We should allow him to rest.”

My shoulders stiffened with the realization of what we were doing. Panicked, I tried to pull myself back up, but the prince wouldn’t budge. “Um...Your Highness?”

The passion had vanished from his face, replaced by a complicated expression. His eyebrows knitted together. Finally, he gave a breathy sigh as if expelling all the tension. "...The tanuki's watchdog..." There was something dangerous, almost murderous, in the way he growled those words out. The prince helped me lift myself back up then pecked me on the cheek, his lips seeming to linger as if he was reluctant to part.

My entire body burned with shame at what I'd done. I was so preoccupied with reflecting on what had happened that I spaced out, not even noticing His Highness had bid me good night and taken his leave. It was only once I calmed down that I finally realized there was something I had forgotten to tell him.

Chapter 9: The Road Ahead

It was the final day of the Hunting Festival.

Since the prince had only joined us late last night, he forewent partaking in the festivities to instead mingle with the nobles. Earl Hayden lived up to his reputation as a hunter, displaying incredible skill as he came out victorious. He gave the flower crown he'd won not to his daughter Lady Anna or me but rather, as he put it, "To the princess of Eidel, Ladybird Sylvia!"

It might not be possible for us to restore her honor in any official capacity yet. Still, I had to wonder why the rumors of the Ghost of Eidel lingered. *Perhaps it's because the people feel guilty over what they did to her*, I considered, but then that could be wishful thinking.

Lady Anna seemed completely different from how she was on the first day of the event. There was an energetic gleam in her eye as she socialized with the other nobles. I would discover why not long after.

As people were leaving in groups of twos and threes, Lady Anna seemed resolved as she approached the earl. "Father, I have something to discuss." Then shortly thereafter, she continued, "I have decided that rather than marry, I would like to pursue a path studying history. There are truths hidden in our past, stories similar to Lady Sylvia Slade's. I want to learn them, spread them, and work to the best of my ability to see we don't repeat the mistakes of those that came before us. I feel that's my duty as a daughter born to the Hayden household."

"You are my only daughter, and you mean to tell me the duty of succeeding our house and continuing our line comes second to studying history?" His words were harsh enough to make her flinch.

I watched, admiring her as she clenched a fist and stood resolutely against him.

"There is more than one way for a woman to live. Lady Sylvia and Lady Elianna taught me how important it is to defend your own beliefs. I cannot take the path you desire for me. Please, disinherit me if you must." She bowed her head low as if she'd resigned herself to this. I could feel nervous butterflies in my stomach as I watched.

Apparently the reason she had remained single was because she already had a path she wanted to walk. I suspected her dream would be a difficult one to pursue, given her status.

Prince Theodore chimed in, "Then why not allow us to employ Lady Anna in the archives?" I looked at him in surprise, and he gave a

cool smile. “Actually, I recently spoke with the Department of History Compilation about hiring a woman. I will give Lady Anna my recommendation. Of course, she will have to be tested just like anyone else.”

Lady Anna also looked shocked, but it was Prince Christopher who sent a weak look my way. “Eli, what did you propose this time?”
“Huh...?”

Slowly, I traced back through my memories, recalling a conversation I’d had with Prince Theodore some time ago.

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Assuming I was remembering correctly, it was a conversation between Prince Theodore, the section chief of Ancient History Research, and me. We were in a corner of the royal archive, sipping tea together. The topic turned to history books, and the chief lamented how all of the most recent tomes were nearly indistinguishable from one another.

After he requested my opinion, I inclined my head and said, “I suppose that’s natural.”

“And why do you think that?” Prince Theodore asked, curious.

“Because the only people you have writing them are men.” The two of them blinked in surprise, so I explained, “There are various ways to interpret history based on which perspective you take. As an example, let us take a look at Sauslind’s history. After the Hero King, the next most popular figure among men is the famous King Rudolph. To the countries in the east, he’s painted as a demonic invader. Thus, history can change depending on the nation that writes it. It’s natural that the books written by those in service to the royal family would be biased in one direction.”

“Yes...I understand part of that, but why would you say it’s biased because a man is writing it?”

I considered the question a bit more. There was one volume in particular that had brought me to that conclusion. “There is a well-known book titled *Rise and Fall of the Hero* by author Ralph Meredith. The story isn’t told by the hero himself but by the people around him, particularly the women. Considering how deeply ingrained the feminine perspective of the book is, it makes me suspect this author was a woman themselves, using an alias.”

“Hm,” said the section chief.

“Technical books, such as history ones, are written exclusively by men,” I continued. “And it’s true, the world does have a tendency to discredit anything women write.” Women’s works were viewed as inferior, and as an unfortunate consequence, people struggled to give them fair assessments.

“So you suspect this person wrote under an alias?”

“Yes. I can’t know for certain. Perhaps this person wasn’t born a woman but possessed a woman’s heart. It’s difficult to say.”

The two men began choking on their tea for some reason. Odd, what would cause them to do that?

“W-Well, I certainly didn’t think about things that way. What you’re trying to say, in other words, is we should try to insert women’s viewpoints, correct?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I believe men and women view history differently. By including a new perspective, you only stand to benefit.”

“I see your point.” The section chief nodded. “I assumed women only read entertainment articles and romance novels, but there are exceptions, like you, Lady Elianna. Perhaps this is something we should consider.”

...That was how the conversation went. Apparently they’d spoken further, without my knowledge, and were of a mind to implement the idea.

Lady Anna’s eyes glistened as she nodded in approval.

The tension seemed to leave Earl Hayden’s face, as if all fatherly concern had faded. Then he looked at me, a mix of bitterness and mirth in his eyes, and said, “Looks like you did me in again.”

Duchess Kreis recounted her memories of Lady Sylvia to us. The latter seemed to be a very strong-hearted, cheerful, and kind woman.

“She was a precious friend to me, yet I couldn’t do anything for her back then. I didn’t even know for sure what was happening at the time. My family, the nobles—the entire country turned their backs and cut ties with the Slade house. Only she was left, whisked away by a Malduran man she’d fallen in love with,” said the duchess. “I didn’t hear the full story until it was all said and done.”

Her plump hand pressed over mine, squeezing softly. “You have my gratitude, Lady Elianna. Thanks to you, I was able to understand where her heart was. If you and Lady Anna continue to uphold the ideals she stood for, then her legacy will live on.” There was a fond nostalgia hidden within her pain, and it prompted a soft smile from me.

Duchess Kreis also entrusted all further mediation with Lord Irvin to me. I requested he have materials from his homeland sent to Sauslind, and in exchange, we planned to export the Suiran weave to Maldura. If Maldura’s moonlight fabric were to be spread throughout Sauslind, the people’s impressions of them might slowly improve.

I also made a secret request for some of the pigs raised in Buna Woods (the ones Lady Anna had told me about before). When Jean

overheard me, he started mumbling, “Great, now you’re gonna get cursed over pork...”

He certainly does have a profound fear of curses, I thought.

While I was recalling those conversations, Duchess Kreis leaned in toward me and whispered something. She claimed Prince Theodore’s first love had been Lady Sylvia. When Prince Theodore was younger, he’d stayed at her family’s estate to receive treatment. She was friends with Lady Sylvia, so that was how the two had met and Prince Theodore fell in love.

“He was so young and yet always tried to act so mature, escorting Syl everywhere. It was adorable.” She laughed as she reminisced about the past.

Nearby, Lord Alan started muttering, “There’s worse out there. Like people who can’t get over their first love and pour everything they have into making it a reality.”

The lady smiled warmly at me. “Thanks to the way things turned out, we’ve at least managed to restore some honor to Syl’s name. That must bring some measure of relief to Prince Theodore and His Majesty.”

At the time, His Majesty had been only a prince, and Prince Theodore had been too young and powerless to do anything either. I wondered if the two had worried over Lady Sylvia this entire time. That would explain why, after I’d made that proposal to avoid war with Maldura, they decided to have Lord Irvin and I meet. Maybe they wondered how I would react. Perhaps I was being tested as the future crown princess.

Throughout all of this, Prince Christopher (who had been kept out of the loop by his father and uncle) had a smile on his face. Though, it did little to soften the air of anger that seemed to emanate from him.

The Hunting Festival had its troubles, but once the festivities were over, the area was bustling with activity as people prepared to return to their territories or the capital. There were so many nobles we had to pay our farewells to that it left my eyes spinning. I slipped away to search for Lord Irvin when I remembered there was still something I had yet to return to him.

He was easy to find; his black hair and feral aura made him stand out amidst the crowd. I rushed over, thrusting the objects in my hand out toward him. “Here, Lord Irvin.” It was the handkerchief he’d loaned me and the book on sewing that belonged to Lady Sylvia. Duchess Kreis had granted me permission to return it to him.

Lord Irvin accepted the handkerchief but turned the book away. “What use does a guy have for a sewing book?” Noble ladies were crowding around his servant who stood nearby. The man had appeared out of nowhere and was so stunning that he’d soon become a

hot topic.

“...All right, then may I keep this book?” I asked. To be frank, sewing was not my forte, but if this book was that precious to Lady Sylvia, I wanted to take good care of it.

“Sure.” He nodded, then looked at me and smiled. “‘Bibliophile Princess,’ huh? That name seems to suit you better than Sauslind’s Brain or any other superfluous title.” His smile didn’t seem to be mocking or sarcastic at all. It was completely genuine, like that of an innocent young boy. “I’d also like to see a country that doesn’t drive out its own for falling in love with a person from a neighboring nation, Lady Elianna.”

Those dark eyes of his regarded me earnestly, so I smiled back at him. There was much we still needed to learn about each other before discussing how we might form a friendship between our countries. Still, his very existence promised that such a conversation *could* be a possibility.

“The Eidel flower will bloom in the spring. Please do come and see it if you can,” I said.

“...And in the spring, you’ll belong to someone else.” He almost sounded disappointed as he said that, but just as quickly he casually reached over and brushed his hand through my hair. “I wonder what would happen if I stole you away, just like my father did with my mother.”

There was a heat in his eyes that seemed to root me in place. I blinked back at him, stunned. Then a cold voice spoke out from behind me, “Are you trying to issue me a challenge?”

It was Prince Christopher. His head hovered above my own. Sparks seemed to fly as the two men locked eyes.



Lord Irvin snickered and let go of my hand. He held a piece of dandelion fluff in his hand. “Only kidding.” His tone was light, his smile as mocking as it always was. Then he pressed the tips of his fingers to his mouth, as if savoring the lingering sensation of my hair on his fingers—as if, in a way, indirectly kissing my hair.

I froze in place from shock, and Prince Christopher stepped in front of me. “Our foreigner seems to be intent on angering me.”

“It was just a joke, don’t get your feathers in a ruffle.” He gave a light laugh again before calling over to me. “Lady Elianna, I’d like to express my respect for your bravery in telling the Guardian of the Border to ‘learn from women.’ I’m glad to have met you, Bibliophile Princess.”

After bidding his farewell, he began to take his leave. The prince watched with a smile on his face. His cold voice seemed to chase after Lord Irvin as he spoke, “I forgot to mention, we still haven’t captured the person responsible for letting those thugs into the country. Do be careful on the road.”

“What?! That’s kind of an important person to let slip out of your grasp—and this is no laughing matter! Hey!” He tried to come charging back at us, but his servant dragged him off.

The prince escorted me away from the area. To what extent had his words been a joke, I wondered. Or was he actually trying to be diplomatic? His Highness seemed to be the same as usual, but I could tell something was off about his mood.

I hesitated to say anything, but then I remembered there was something I had forgotten to tell him before. I gulped, readied myself, and then finally pushed out the words. “...Prince Chris.”

For a moment, those surprised blue eyes stared back at me.

The reason I never could call him by that nickname was probably because of how embarrassed and timid I was. Even so, I could remember my loneliness during the Hunting Festival and how badly I’d missed him. It reminded me just how precious our time together was. Once I remembered that, the people around us no longer seemed to matter.

I should have said this sooner but... I hesitated. *Better late than never.* “Um...welcome home.”

His brilliant blue eyes blinked then softened. It was as if the clouds hanging over him had cleared. His smile was so gentle, so sweet it seemed to wash over me. “I’m home, my Ladybird.”

Arc 2: The Brilliant Imperial Guard and the Three Keys

Key 1

On her way home from visiting the treatment facility, the normally vacant lady had an unusually apologetic look on her face. “I’m sorry, Lord Glen...to call you out here like this when you’re supposed to be on break.”

I, Glen Eisenach, gave her the same bitter laugh I always did. “I don’t mind. Besides, this is all because of that tyrant prince. He’s the one who said he couldn’t let you leave the capital without him escorting you or some other ridiculous nonsense. Anyway, a man’s greatest honor is to escort a beautiful woman,” I said, smiling.

The girl, who so resembled a porcelain doll, blinked and then smiled back at me. She was accustomed to the way I talked and showed little reaction. Her maid, who was far less accustomed to receiving flattery from men, lit up in embarrassment.

Ahh, women are so cute.

Those were my true, honest-to-God feelings. Although men had certain preferences when it came to a partner’s age and such, there was one thing they couldn’t deny. The effort every woman put into their beauty was equal to even the tireless daily training we knights underwent. All it took from me was one word for a lady to lose her mask of composure and blush. There was no moment more blissful than that in the world.

There were, however, exceptions to everything.

“Hey, Annie,” said the noble lady. “This isn’t something I’m considering in the immediate future, but just as an idea for the feast on the Holy Night, do you think we might be able to procure some masks?”

“Masks, you say?” asked the maid.

“Yes. The children all seemed to love the folktale I just read to them, *The Holy Night’s Keys*. I thought maybe I could put on a little play for them by acting out the part of the old woman in the tale.”

“M-My lady...you’d play as that pig-headed, greedy old hag...?”

“Yes.” The lady nodded as if she’d thought up a brilliant idea. For once her cheeks were blushing over something that wasn’t a book. She must have been really happy that the story was so popular with the children. “Or perhaps,” she said, a hand against her chin as she seriously contemplated, “I might be better fit for the role of the ghost that possesses the protagonist.”

“...Are you trying to add to the ghost stories we already have, my lady...?” the maid mumbled, but her protest didn’t seem to reach her pensive mistress.

I remembered the incident that happened this past summer and let out a quiet sigh. Since I was originally supposed to be off-duty today, I was in a casual outfit rather than my usual uniform. We were all seated in a coach, riding back to the capital. The noble lady riding along with me, who was seriously fretting over whether she’d be best dressing up as an old woman or acting as a ghost, was Lady Elianna Bernstein. She was betrothed to the Crown Prince of Sauslind, Prince Christopher, to whom I owed my loyalty. More generally, however, she was known by the nickname Bibliophile Princess.

Her features made her look like a porcelain doll, with platinum hair that seemed almost translucent in the light. Her skin was so pale it was almost snowy white. Such an appearance made it easy enough for men to fantasize about her. Although anyone bewitched by her appearance alone would soon have their dreams crushed once she opened her mouth, hence my view of her as an exception. Overall she seemed quite docile, like a perfectly sheltered noble lady, but she wasn’t one you could underestimate.

The moment she spoke up, she could put the most veteran politicians to shame with her debate skills. She also had a discerning eye and a keen mind that proposed ideas no one else could dream of. Just the other day she had shocked me by making Earl Hayden, the man hailed as the Guardian of the Border, take a knee. If I let my guard down around her, she’d snap the heart of my inner little boy into pieces (as she had before). You had to keep your guard up with her. It wouldn’t be an overstatement to say she’d made me reconsider the way I thought of noblewomen after meeting her.

My thoughts went drifting back to the past, and I sighed again. “Lady Elianna, for the Holy Night’s Banquet, you have a duty to appear before the people as the crown prince’s betrothed. I don’t see how you would have the free time to perform any kind of play.”

The feast celebrated the end of the old year and the start of a new one. Being with family was especially important on this day, and those living in the capital marked the occasion with a lively feast.

Lady Elianna would be at the center of the event, given her status, but when I hinted as much to her, she seemed almost crestfallen. “I

suppose you're right," she said.

Did she really have that much fun with the children? I wondered, surprised.

This treatment center was originally set up at the beginning of this summer. It specialized in caring for low income earners. Lady Elianna was the one who first came up with the idea for it. Chris spent years laying preparations to have it approved.

I was worried at first when I heard they were planning to construct it outside of the capital. When I expressed those concerns, the dazzling prince said, "If we built it at the heart of the capital, nobles or wealthy merchants would show up just to mock the place." He insisted it be built outside the city limits.

True, those normally too poor to seek the consultation of a doctor wouldn't go out of their way to step foot into an extravagant treatment center erected in the middle of the capital. Chris certainly was right about that. By being far away from the interior of the city, the center was beyond the reach of those with authority and became popular with the lower class. It was also intended to serve the Roma and other traveling entertainers that made their way across the continent. This helped its fame reach beyond our borders.

It was a place where people could learn specialized medicine and conduct research. Previously, standard practice had been for people to learn their medical or pharmaceutical skills directly from someone more proficient, but at this facility, there were new, alternative approaches. This also drew people's attention.

One particular noble, who'd had his eye on the center, tried to create a similar one in the middle of the capital. Predictably, the clientele were all wealthy nobles, and the doctors there were all hoping to serve them in order to gain political clout. It was less of a center for learning medical skills and more of a microcosm for political maneuvering. Its reputation was rather poor as well, so plans to close the doors on the project were already in place.

Chris's aim had been for the doors of Lady Elianna's center to open up for even those outside of our country, and it had succeeded in that purpose. Although they couldn't allow people to learn medical skills there free of charge, a policy was put in place so that those with ambition could financially support the institution. This opened up possibilities to those who were impoverished as well. Most importantly, these measures triggered an influx of people. Those from all over, possessing different medical and pharmaceutical knowledge, began pouring in. Soon, the area outside the capital was booming.

However, with as many people as were gathered, it was only natural for fights to break out as well. It was an inevitable result of accepting so many people from such a wide variety of backgrounds.

Still, this facility had the country's support behind it, so none of the fuss had ever spiraled out of control. More accurately put, it had never been allowed to.

He had never allowed it to.

Since the prince's betrothed was responsible for the center, she frequently visited. There was no way he would ever allow her to step foot into a place that wasn't safe. Besides, when she did elect to visit, the imperial guard accompanied her, and their watchful gaze acted as extra protection. This ensured public order. The traffic also encouraged merchants to set up routes here. Soon, this area was thriving with a culture all its own, fully endorsed by the government.

It wasn't long before life began to take root, producing such energy and activity as could rival the inner parts of the capital. No one could accuse the place of being a slum anymore; the region was too profitable to be called that.

Before its implementation, the plan was slammed by opposition critics as a waste of tax money. They were all forced to shut their mouths now that they saw the prosperity it brought. Rather than service the few elite, it had been created as a place to provide care for those in need. The reason the people didn't critique it as mere clout-chasing philanthropy was because there were actual measures put in place to provide jobs and create returns, thereby fostering a solid infrastructure for people's livelihoods. It was only natural that Prince Christopher and Lady Elianna's popularity had risen rapidly; the former was responsible for pushing those measures through and the latter was the one who had originally come up with the idea.

Chris and Alex, as well as the king, the prime minister, and some others, were watching to see how the region developed. They had a vision (albeit a distant one) of turning the place into a second city in the future. If things kept at the pace they were going, plans for that might need to be carried out even sooner.

Instead of forcing maintenance on the slums, Prince Chris had reformed the area just by building a single facility. I was impressed. *That was only his opening move. Just how big of an effect was he even going for?* I wondered. As someone close to him, I couldn't help sighing to myself for two reasons: I was sweating bullets thinking about how busy my schedule would be, and as a friend, I cared for him.

His plans made two things clear: he had a vision for the future and an impressive ability to carry those ideas out. As someone who would eventually work in administrative policy, he also had a clear understanding of the processes and what was required. He was so open-minded. It was really admirable. Commendable, even. So then why was he so damn close-minded when it came to one specific

person?

“Ah... Lady Elianna.”

She—the aforementioned specific person—lifted her head.

I decided to probe her to see if I could find out the reason behind the prince’s foul mood as of late. “Uh...if you don’t want to answer, you don’t have to. But did something happen between you and Chris at the Hunting Festival?”

Her cheeks immediately lit up. The vacant expression she’d had on her face moments before, which made her look like a porcelain doll, had disappeared completely. It was like watching a flower bud gradually bloom, innocent and adorable. Not that I would ever say as much. My life would be over the moment the words left my lips.

“A-Anything, you ask? Um...”

Lady Elianna was incapable of lying. Her fumbling response was the equivalent of an outright confession. Obviously something *had* transpired. I let out another quiet sigh.

It had happened just a month ago, a memory I’d rather not recall.

When Chris set out for the Miseral Dukedom on official business, it was only natural that we accompanied him; those of us in the second division of the imperial guard were appointed specifically as his bodyguards.

Things went smoothly at first. The lord of each region we passed through paid proper hospitality, and there was no sign of any danger. The farther we got from the capital, the more attention we got from the young women—all the way from hoots to suggestive gazes. That was only a given. By definition of working for the royal family, everyone knew we received a hefty salary. As the prince’s guards, we were also the face of the country. The most handsome men were handpicked for our unit.

Long ago, we had been chosen based on blood relation or prestige. Those things proved little more than useless decoration on the battlefield, however. Thus, a few generations ago, one of Sauslind’s kings reformed the system. Only those with actual ability were recruited now. Though even without the reforms, my father and brother (who managed the imperial guard) would never employ people for looks or status alone. Since our division was full of promising young folk, we were incredibly popular with the court women and palace maids. The countryside was the same in that respect. It was also the same in that despite our popularity, we had no luck with women.

The moment we arrived in Miseral Dukedom, Chris received a report from one of his Shadows. The ceremony was barely over, and he’d scarcely paid his respects to the archduke before hopping on his

horse and flying out of there. He'd resolved the necessary political duties he'd been obligated to perform at the event through...alternative methods. He wrote an official document for one and pushed another off onto the ambassador. For the final one, he threatened the other side into silence by saying, "I know your secrets." And so, the elite few of the imperial guard were yanked along with him to make a return trip to Sauslind.

This took place over the span of half of a day. It was conceivably not enough time for making progress with any ladies. Those of us assigned to Chris were accustomed (resigned) to being dragged around by him. This time, however, he hadn't filled us in on any of the details, so we were all suspicious.

...Well, granted, we had a pretty good guess.

I somehow managed to convince Chris, who was charging us blindly forward, to give us a chance to rest at a remote village. It was here that I caught wind of my men exchanging theories as to the cause of our sudden rush back home. My face went pale as I listened, unable to defend against anything they were saying.

"Something definitely has happened to Lady Elianna."

They were in a spacious quarter of the village leader's house, repurposed as a resting area. I was just about to enter when I heard their hushed whispers trickle out from a crack in the door. After being released from a tense night of riding, they had all bathed (just as the prince and I had done) and filled their bellies with warm food, allowing them to finally relax. I could hear amusement in their voices as they spoke.

"For Prince Chris to lose all his composure like that, you just know it has to be Lady Elianna."

"Yeah, I agree, but she's at an official event, right? Guard Captain Sieg is there with her. I can't imagine anything crazy happening."

"Exactly, so that got me thinking. It can't be that she's in danger. It's gotta be something else."

"Something else?" another voice asked, gaining interest. Their tone showed a noticeable hint of enjoyment.

"I'll be straight, I think it's got to do with another guy."

"No way," another one of them gasped. They almost sounded like a couple of giddy maids engaging in the palace rumor mill.

Someone else agreed with the previous man. "Nah, it can't be."

"Yeah, I can't imagine Lady Elianna having anything to do with any other guy," said another. "One of the most striking memories I have of her is from back when she first became engaged to the prince. Around that time, Earl Granville came from the north to the capital on business. He's that handsome guy people call the 'Scion of the Silver Moon.' He's also friends with Prince Theodore."

“Oh yeah, him...” replied the others, voices strained with bitterness from the recollection.

“When he came to the capital, he was the talk of noblewomen *and* their daughters. Even court ladies and maids in the palace were bewitched... Honestly, His Majesty made an excellent choice confining that jerk to the north, if you ask me.”

“You got that right.”

Inwardly, I absolutely agreed with them. That man almost walked off with all of the women in the palace.

“And then,” the guard continued, chuckling to himself, “I happened to run into him when he was speaking with Prince Theodore and Lady Elianna. Earl Granville was talking about *Spring in the North*, an emotional tale about how the pioneer of the region developed the land and hunted the animals there. But when Lady Elianna got involved in the conversation, somehow it turned gory. She started talking about this manual for hunters she had found that painted a graphic picture of how to properly dismember a bear and consume its meat. She’d developed a keen interest in the traditional hunting methods of the Matagi (winter hunters) and started asking Earl Granville about his first-hand experience...”

Unable to suppress their laughter, the men began snickering.

“That wiped the smile right off that Silver Moon Scion’s face. He was struck speechless. Almost like he was thinking ‘What fresh hell did I just walk into?!’”

I nodded along with them. It seemed I wasn’t the only person who had fallen victim to Lady Elianna and her books. Though rather than empathize with his pain, I secretly felt satisfied at his misery.

“And so,” the man who’d started the whole conversation continued, “if Lady Elianna couldn’t be swayed by Earl Granville, then I see no reason why she’d take an interest in any other guy now.”

Another chuckled before saying, “I’ve got a similar story.” This became a long stream of highly embellished anecdotes surrounding Lady Elianna. What more could you expect from a division attached to His Highness? I was half impressed with how much they paid attention and half disheartened. Their stories were all from rumors Alex, Alan, and I had endeavored to either erase completely or rewrite.

My eyes were starting to glaze over when the man who first started the talk, Fritz, said, “Okay, okay,” and drew everyone’s attention. “So, none of us think that she’s had any interest in the opposite sex, right? But look, she’s returned the prince’s affections now. That means she isn’t completely incapable of romantic feelings. She’s not *just* a book-loving princess.”

“Well, yeah, I guess. She’s at that age where interest in romance is

pretty normal for a lady.”

“Right? And you guys know the recent rumors making the rounds with the nobles, don’t you? Her face has more emotion on it, probably because she’s got feelings for the prince. Sometimes she lets her guard down and actually smiles. Guys who see that expression think she’s so adorable they’ve been crowding around her at the evening parties, from what I hear.”

“True enough,” said another voice.

I had my head leaned forward, the same posture I’d been maintaining ever since I heard them speak Lady Elianna’s name. But all of a sudden, I could feel a chill caress the back of my neck.

Strange... Alexei wasn’t supposed to be here so why does it suddenly feel so cold...

“Up until now, Prince Chris has been able to keep a watch and control things, so everyone restrained themselves. I’m sure there’s a bunch of people that will see this as a prime opportunity with him gone. I’d bet on it, even.”

“Ahh, I see. So what you’re saying is that since she has shown an interest in romance, other men will see that as a great opportunity for them to sneak in.”

“Yep, if they make their move while Prince Chris is away, maybe even the Bibliophile Princess can be swayed. That’s what they’re thinking. You get what I’m saying, right? It took him almost ten years to finally wriggle his way into her heart, and now he’s got a report that someone’s trying to swing in and snatch her away. No wonder Prince Chris is so flustered and panicking to get back.” They chuckled to themselves.

Despite the fact that we had just gotten out of the baths earlier, I could feel the trickle of a cold sweat down my back. This was my fault for not cutting in and stopping them when I had a chance. The oppressive aura behind me was without parallel. There wasn’t a person on earth that could hope to overcome it. If anyone existed who could, it would have to be the heroes we heard about in legends.

That overwhelming presence elegantly slipped past me. I could only watch as he put his hand on the door handle. I said a prayer for my poor subordinates. *Rest in peace*. The creak of the door sounded like the gates of hell swinging open. For some reason, the prince was smiling, but it looked more like the sinister grin of a ruler from the demon world.

“Those were certainly some interesting opinions I got to hear from all of you,” he said.

The moment the men realized, it was like something snapped inside of them. Color drained from their faces. They knew instantly who was there, even without him entering their field of vision.

The tyrannical ruler continued mercilessly, his words polite but unforgiving. “I was reflecting on my actions, worried I had pushed you all far too much, but it seems my concern was misplaced. Judging by your lively conversation, I guess my imperial guards still have quite a lot of energy left in them after all.”

In a suggestive tone, the peerless and absolute crown prince announced a rigorous test for all of them, keeping his obligatory, dazzling smile on as he did so. “Fritz, just as we first discussed, you will ride out to the nearby towns and report to them. If you leave on your horse now, you should be able to make it back before dawn. The rest of you will move in the meantime. Help instruct the town’s militia on what countermeasures to take from here on out. They’re all terrified of the danger that bandits would present. It will bring some comfort to have the capital’s patrol unit give them guidance directly. Oh, and while you’re at it, strengthen the barrier around the village as well. That should help the villagers rest easier and improve our reputation.”

He grinned in a way that said he’d entertain no protest. Then, this man who held the future of Sauslind in his hands, commanded, “Now go.” Then, like a hunter landing the killing blow, he also added, “We’ll depart at dawn. Make sure to have your duties wrapped up before then, everyone.”

My subordinates all shot me looks of despair, as if screaming at me in protest to say, “Isn’t our job supposed to be protecting the crown prince?! Why do we have to do this?!” But all I could do was silently shake my head at them. *Give it up, guys, you brought this on yourselves.* That was the only consolation I could think of.

As I recalled those rigorous couple of days, I found myself unconsciously rubbing at the corners of my eyes. The reason people said our group seemed even more imposing than we had been was precisely because of that incident. Those few days were no less strenuous than an actual battlefield. We scarcely slept and stayed on our horses constantly, at times not even bothering to stop at the villages we passed, camping out instead. Never before had we spent days at a time desperate for relaxing sleep, a nice bed, and a warm meal.

I could still, unfortunately, recall one of the things my men muttered at the time. “I thought we were supposed to be part of the imperial guard working for the palace, a group that everyone reveres...”

Still, we managed to get through it all without any deserters. There was an even stronger sense of unity among us after it was over. I understood then better than I ever had before why my older brother

told me, “For Prince Christopher’s unit, we put an emphasis on youth and stamina above all else.” ...Of course, I was the leader of said group, so at the time it felt like he was telling me my youth and stamina were all I had going for me. I remembered being depressed about it.

“...Lord Glen? You have tears in your eyes, are you all right?” Lady Elianna had her hand pressed over her blushing cheeks as she peered over at me.

I almost found myself glaring back at her resentfully—which was out of character for me—but I managed to relax myself first. It wasn’t her fault. Even though our prince, widely regarded for his wisdom and greatness, easily flipped on a dime to become the living incarnation of the devil because of her, she wasn’t at all to blame. The fault lay completely with Chris. Besides, it was improper for a man to assign such responsibility to a woman.

Yeah, that’s right, I thought to myself, knitting my brows as I looked back at the lady who regarded me with such curiosity.

Chris had only been concerned for her well-being at first, but overhearing my subordinates had inspired a different kind of anxiety. It was clear to see that his unease had only increased. Judging by her reaction, however, it didn’t seem as though any cracks had formed in their relationship during the incident at the Hunting Festival. In fact, they had turned so lovey-dovey that the rest of us watching might have all the life sapped out of us before their wedding day even came.

I reflected my usual smile back at her, though inwardly I had to cock my head in confusion. If the problem wasn’t with Lady Elianna and their relationship, then what had him in such a grumpy mood?

Key 2

The imperial guard's barracks were located in a corner of the Sauslind palace, and it was here that some men were sobbing, their voices brimming with sorrow. If these men had been beautiful women instead, I wouldn't have hesitated to take them into my arms and shower them with words of reassurance. Unfortunately, I had reservations about offering the same to a bunch of filthy men. There was one among us, however, that was conscientious enough to soothe the rest.

"Cheer up, guys. Look at Commander Glen. He's involved in a dozen romantic affairs with all kinds of different women, but even he gets slapped across the cheek sometimes. Getting rejected and ignored happens to guys all the time!" The man trying to offer these warm words of compassion was named Zack Rudin. Although he was older than me, he was actually my (well-respected) second-in-command. Recently, he cooperated with the divisional commander of the group of imperial guards we'd left behind in Miseral Dukedom to ensure they returned home without incident. He was adaptive and exceptional at looking after others, always doing what he could to support the group.

Still, this is ridiculous, I thought, perturbed at the lingering stinging sensation on my cheek.

This whole thing had started just a few hours earlier...

Once I had delivered Lady Elianna to the royal archives earlier, I'd thought I was finally free—today was supposed to be my day off originally anyway. I approached the court ladies and palace maids, engaging them in pleasant small talk. Then, right as things were getting steamy between me and one of the married noblewomen in the inner palace's open garden...

"Commander Glen!" Zack spotted me with his ridiculously keen eyesight. He insisted I come along with him and, without explanation, started trying to drag me away.

Not only did he intervene right when things were getting good, but he also smeared my glowing, gentlemanly reputation. It was only natural that my mood soured. I mean, come on, this was my day off! How many times was I supposed to put up with my boss or coworkers interrupting my pleasurable pursuits?

"I'm a little preoccupied entertaining this lady," I told him gruffly.

“Yeah, I have eyes. I can see that. But you change partners every day. Instead of focusing on some girl you’ll find a replacement for tomorrow anyway, why don’t you prioritize the men under you who *can’t* be replaced? Besides, you’re the one who said older women like this were easy and lacked the adorable innocence of their younger counterparts.”

“You...!”

That was just a general observation I’d made during some light-hearted talk with the other guards! *Are you seriously going to say that here, of all places?!* My face paled.

The lady I was with glared daggers at me and whipped her hand across my cheek.

And that brings us back to the present. Since he was so insistent, I followed Zack here only to find my men in low spirits.

You just wanted to bring me here to try to make them all feel better by showing them how miserably things turned out for me, I thought, scowling in annoyance at him as well as the man beside him.

After they finished laughing at the handprint on my cheek, they soon resumed their gloomy dispositions. This prompted one of the men to say, “I think some funeral music would be fitting right about now.” At this point, I was about ready to play a requiem for them myself.

Alan, the boyish master musician with honey-colored hair and sharp, emerald green eyes, gave an unsympathetic shrug. “I had no idea this was how it would turn out either. After all, your division has a shining reputation. Even those stiff court ladies have commented on how much more ‘masculine and dignified’ you have all become, asking me to act as a go-between. That’s why I inquired about doing a matchmaking tea party for everyone, but... Hmm...” He scratched at his cheek.

I let out another heavy sigh. The palace had become restless recently due to the preparations for Chris’s marriage ceremony in the spring. There was talk of new couples coming together all the time; men and women alike were anxiously looking for partners with promising prospects for the future. Considering how great an event it was for their own country’s prince to get married, they were probably just being carried along by the hype.

Still... I thought, feeling the urge to scratch my cheek as well.

One of the men sitting with their arms around their knees, head lowered, suddenly mumbled pitifully, “There was this...maid I was talking to. She begged me to bring her back some souvenirs from the Miseral Dukedom. But we were barely there for even half a day, you know? I had no idea what to tell her when I came back... Was I

supposed to regale her with the story of how we defeated those bandits? Or about how difficult it was camping outside? Or about how terrifying the prince is underneath that sparkling exterior?"

"...Nah, you'd be putting the noose around your own neck if you tried that last one. You were right not to bring it up," Alan said bluntly.

The man wept. "I wish I could be as two-faced as Commander Glen when it comes to courting women... I ran out of things to talk about and started rambling on instinct. But the more I babbled on, the worse things got. When I told her about all of Commander Glen's romantic escapades, she looked at me so coldly! She didn't have to say anything, her eyes and the air around her said it all—"What a bore!"

While I did empathize, I couldn't ignore all the jabs he'd taken at me.

Zack gave our sobbing subordinate a comforting pat on the shoulder. In case you were wondering, this jerk (Zack) was already married, hence why he wasn't participating in everyone else's pity party.

One of the other men had a melancholy look on his face, eyes glazed over. "I was also asked to bring back a souvenir for this maid I'd gotten close to. Some kinda limited-time-only sweet—Black Pearl's Tear or Goose's Egg, or something like that. The way she looked at me, it was like her eyes were saying 'God, he's so useless.'"

"It happened to me too!" shouted another man, wailing dramatically. "I thought this was the perfect chance for me to get close to a court lady I'd been crushing on named Miss Marie! But when I greeted her, she didn't even seem to recognize me without my uniform! Her eyes said it all. 'These guys are nothing without their uniforms!'"

Alan slapped a hand over his mouth, stifling himself just in time. If he burst out into laughter, every single man here would resent him for it. They'd also probably all gang up on him too. I wouldn't step in to stop them, either.

"Why is it like this, Commander Glen?!"

As I was inwardly debating whether I should try to cheer them up or correct their poor perceptions of me, one of them had already turned to me in desperation.

"Do we really lack all appeal without our uniforms?! I mean, sure, I can understand to a degree. Guys can appreciate the look of women's formal court dresses too. Still, isn't this kinda absurd? Do you know what they say about us in whispers? 'Sieg's first division looks far more beguiling outside of their uniforms than the second division does.'"

He sounded like a teenage boy the way he was protesting this

“unfair treatment,” but he wasn’t alone. Someone else soon joined him. “Exactly, Commander! Do you realize all we’ve done up until now? We went without sleep or breaks while gathering evidence of misdeeds. I even had to do an emergency shift and stand up a noble lady for dinner after I finally got her to agree to go out with me. I endured exhausting conditions comparable to that of a soldier at war. And do you know what my reward was? The girl I was after got stolen from me by one of the men under Guard Captain Sieg’s command! I-I can’t believe it... Now Lady Flora will never be my girlfriend...!”

“You too?” another man whispered. In a show of camaraderie, the two shared a hug.

My eldest brother was the leader of the first division, one full of married men. They were all generous, had stable working hours, and were enormously popular with women.

Meanwhile, I was supposed to be off duty today and yet here I was, my exhaustion mounting. Any mental tranquility I might have had was being gradually chipped away.

Suddenly, Fritz broke in with, “If girls falling for the men in Guard Captain Sieg’s division was the worst of it, then that wouldn’t be so bad.” He spit out the words so venomously it almost sounded like a hex. Just days earlier, his own big mouth had brought him great misfortune.

“You see,” he went on, “I had this girl I liked, and I confessed to her, hoping for some salvation after all I went through. But you know what she said? ‘I know he’s extremely cold and distant with everyone, but I still prefer guys like Lord Alexei.’ Can you believe that? There are guys like Commander Glen who—while admittedly unfaithful—are kind to all women, and yet there are still women out there who would prefer someone like the Ice Demon over him. If I have to choose between losing to an inhuman creature or some guy in Guard Captain Sieg’s division, I’ll take the latter, thanks. At least then maybe I’d still have some hope left for the future...”

The other men patted Fritz on the shoulder in an attempt to comfort him. The solidarity between them was so intense it was almost suffocating. Seeing it, I inwardly felt a cold sweat coming on. These idiots still hadn’t learned from the previous misfortune their indiscriminate rambling had wrought.

I turned my eyes straight to Alan, the one most likely to go spilling the beans to Alex, but our master musician, with his honey-colored hair, was pressed up against a nearby wall. His whole body was contorting as he tried desperately to hold in his laughter.

Right as I was losing my patience with him, one of my men suddenly clung to me. “Commander!” He looked like a lost puppy the way he stared up at me so earnestly. “What’s our appeal? You’ve

suffered alongside us as our commander, you should know best, right?!"

"We're not really looking to play with fire and sleep around with a bunch of loose married women like you, Commander. We just want to be able to dream about having a future with *one* cute girl!"

"Exactly! I mean, sure, every guy aspires to be the type surrounded by fawning women, but... I don't need a dozen girls clinging to me. I just need one. But what can I do to get Miss Marie to turn my way when I'm not in uniform?!"

Uhh... My vision swam as I struggled to form a response.

Their personalities weren't the main issue here. In truth, the solution to their struggle was clear: if they were reassigned out of Chris's guard, the problem would be resolved. If they were no longer called in for sudden duty, they wouldn't have to break promises to the women in their lives. This would also put an end to them being forced to undertake missions unbefitting of their station.

However, if they *did* get reassigned, it would be a stain on the honor of the top brass who had poured such effort into training them up. The real problem was that, while many viewed a position as one of the prince's guard as being a starring role, those who knew the true horrors that awaited did their utmost to avoid landing such a post. The lack of willing candidates was a real thorn in the management's side.

I hesitated before finally throwing a do-something-already look Zack's way. He returned my gaze calmly. His own eyes seemed to reply, *I already did my duty by bringing you here to have you console them. Use that charm of yours to handle the rest.* The two of us continued this silent, biting exchange as I glared back, *You bastard.*

We were interrupted when Alan, who had been busy trying to stifle his own laughter, finally cut in. "What, so that's it?" There was something ominous about the grin I saw on his face. Alan almost looked like the devil whispering false promises in the ears of heartbroken men. "Let's go all the way back. Those ladies fell for you because you were 'masculine and dignified.' Sure, maybe the uniforms did have...somewhat of an effect. Still, think—when was it you all shone brightest in their eyes? Try and remember what triggered those stiff court ladies to turn their feverish gazes on you in the first place. What mission had you just completed back then?"

Suddenly, life returned to the men's eyes, as if they were lost sheep who'd discovered a light in the dark. I tried to cut in quickly to stop them, but Alan beat me to the punch. "You shine your brightest when you've been worked to the bone!"

"Ooooh!" roared my clingy bunch of subordinates.

"That's right, Commander Glen! I mean honestly speaking,

everyone secretly calls the prince stuff like the ‘handsome devil incarnate’ and the ‘demon lord in disguise,’ but it turns out all of those tribulations we went through were to draw out our inner charm, huh!”

No, hold on a second here. You guys are confusing actions and consequences right now. How utterly stupid—I mean, gullible—are you all?!

“Commander Glen! I guess I was wrong. I was considering anonymously tattling on the wicked prince for his poor treatment of us to Lady Elianna, but he actually knew this whole time exactly how to refine us into strapping young men all the ladies would fall for, didn’t he!”

I was at a loss for words.

As my men brightened, their spirits uplifted, our master musician was twisting his body in voiceless laughter. There wasn’t anything more irritating than hearing his breathless voice eke out, “A-Alex said everyone in your division had about as much brains as you, Glen. I-I finally understand what he meant when he said ‘They’re easy to manipulate but exasperating’...” He was laughing so hard he was wheezing and holding his stomach. I was about ready to relieve him from his pain by stopping his breathing altogether. He seemed to enjoy entertaining himself like this without regard for the consequences that might result later.

Not long ago, I was with Chris when he received a minute report on the details of what transpired at the Autumn Hunting Festival. The smile on his face had been so menacing that it filled me with trepidation. I was sure blood would be spilled before things were over. Part of that was because my bird-brain subordinates, in their affinity for gossip, accurately predicted exactly what had happened. There was talk that men had crowded around Lady Elianna during Chris’s absence at the evening parties. To add to that, there were other special circumstances as well involving a foreign guest who had an unusually high amount of contact with Lady Elianna and purposefully antagonized the prince. It didn’t help that, for her part, she’d shown some interest in this outsider as well.

That sure was a terrifying report, I recalled with a shiver. Unaware of my thoughts, Alan continued to look amused beside me.

In the wake of all that, Chris’s foul mood had only continued to deepen, leaving me convinced something else must have happened. Considering how talented this musician was at evading Chris’s outbursts and redirecting them onto other people, I decided nipping his nonsense in the bud would be the fastest solution.

Amidst all of this, Fritz remained sullen, gloomily muttering, “...But what should I do, Commander Glen? I guess I should probably just challenge the Ice Demon to a duel and go into it prepared to have

my ass handed to me. Or maybe I should go with something else? Maybe I could have the handsome devil incarnate take me on as his pupil so I can learn the skills to have a fighting chance against the Ice Demon.”

They were all so gullible (and desperate) that they looked ready to dive into whatever quickest solution presented itself. I wanted to groan in frustration at the lot of them. If Alan suggested the answer to their problems was marching into the gates of hell, they were simple-minded enough they would probably all pack up and go.

I swallowed back the enormous sigh hanging at the back of my throat and slapped Fritz on the shoulder. “Calm down a bit, all of you. You don’t need to rejoice in your own suffering or develop a hunger for danger to solve your problems. People will start looking at me funny... Uh, I mean, believe me when I say there’s a girl out there for each of you. As for you, Fritz, there’s no need to get so depressed. You know what all the ladies say about Alex. ‘There’s nothing lacking in him as a marriage partner, but no one would ever want to date him.’

“In other words, no one would give him a second look if not for his status and lineage. You guys are way more appealing than him—the man’s got ice flowing through his veins. You’re better than that. Even the way you guys are kinda clingy can be endearing. So don’t try to fight back against someone who isn’t human in the first place, and *don’t* try to become like him yourself. You’re fine the way you are.”

Yeah. That was a pretty good speech, if I do say so myself. Seeing how all my men were suddenly standing at attention, staring at me, I felt even more confident in what I’d said.

Alan suddenly tripped over himself saying, “Uh! I still have some work left to do. Good luck, Glen’s squad! I look forward to chatting with you all again if time permits!”

Almost as soon as he fled, all of my subordinates (with the exception of Zack) saluted me. “We will carve your words into our hearts, Commander! Your bravery will never be forgotten. It will be the guiding light as we continue to devote ourselves to training and discipline! Now please excuse us!” They all turned their backs together and left.

What in the world was that about? What did they mean by “my bravery”? I was too disappointed by their reaction to notice the chilly air at my feet.

“Zack,” said a quiet voice from behind.

All of the air in my lungs instantly escaped through my mouth. How long had he been here? I could feel the temperature drop, as if everything around me had frozen.

To my shock, the Ice Demon himself—Chris’s right-hand man, Alexei—was here. He handed over some documents to my vice

commander before beginning a very businesslike conversation. “There were a few questionable points in your official report from the other day. Including the cost of sixteen replacement horses in your business expenses is absolutely absurd. Besides, as part of the imperial guard, you have already been furnished with the best mounts in the kingdom. You mean to tell me you rode them to exhaustion and then abandoned them? I would very much like to hear what could have possibly motivated your division to do something so irrational and idiotic.”

“Oh, well, you see...” Zack began, his voice the very picture of composure. But then, to my dismay, he redirected the conversation at me. “Commander Glen volunteered to brief you on the details, so I didn’t write an official explanation of everything. His loyalty to the prince is truly incredible, an example we should all follow.”

If you truly thought that, then you would be the one covering for Chris right now instead of sacrificing me! I bristled inwardly with nowhere else to voice my complaints.

Alexei’s icy blue eyes bore right into me so coldly I feared he might freeze me where I stood. It was painful—no, perhaps chilling was the right word—to be on the receiving end of such a look. “Is that right? Perhaps I should remind you that it is also a retainer’s duty to censure their lord’s reckless behavior. The fact you didn’t do that and instead abandoned the imperial guard’s premium steeds for a commoner’s team of barely-trained horses must mean you were prepared to shoulder the resulting financial loss and unexpected expenses yourself. I admire your grit, Glen. Compensation for this will be taken straight out of your salary. You needn’t fear; you’ll only have to work unpaid for a year to return all that you owe. You should be glad you’re in such a well-paid position.”

His words had all the impact of an enormous block of ice slamming into me from above. I staggered, looking as pale as if I were the walking dead. I bent to my knees in front of the Ice Demon, desperate enough I’d be willing to sell my soul to the devil if it would grant me salvation. “Please forgive me. I spoke out of turn. Please, don’t take away my salary.”

Zack just watched us with a bitter smile on his face, accustomed to seeing such exchanges by now.



Key 3

After bending down before the Demon for mercy, I was given a mountain of materials to deal with (despite being off duty for the day). I hauled them with me into the royal archives, completely unaware that my last trial of the day still awaited me.

As I put away the last book, my body felt heavy with accumulated fatigue. If I stopped to think back on what had landed me in this position, a sense of emptiness threatened to overwhelm me. I chose not to dwell on it much—for the sake of my own mental tranquility.

As I stepped around the corner of one of the shelves, I caught the sound of a book falling nearby. I figured it was one of the staff being careless, but I took a peek nonetheless. Down one of the aisles, a man had dropped the book he'd been holding and was standing there dumbfounded. There was a girl standing a short distance in front of him, reading a tome of her own.

Her hair looked faded platinum in the light, her pure features drawn tight in a serious expression. For a moment, the air about her seemed almost divine, like a being descended from the heavens. The sound of the fallen book caught her attention belatedly. She blinked her aqua gray eyes and turned her attention to the person standing nearby. "Prince Theodore?"

The Demon—uh, wrong person, the *uncle* of the Demon (and Chris)—Prince Theodore swallowed his breath, looking gobsmacked. As the curator of the royal archive, his presence here wasn't particularly unusual, but there was something odd about his reaction. "Eli," he started to say, as if he doubted his very eyes, pointing at the book she held in her hands. "That book..."

I was just as confused as the lady, who tilted her head in response to the question. She was known widely as the Bibliophile Princess. What was so odd about her reading a book? Though I was soon flabbergasted when I heard her reply.

"Oh, this? *A Mother's First Time Giving Birth*. The pregnancy has already been confirmed, so I thought I should equip myself with the proper knowledge before the delivery. It seems, as I suspected, there are many troubling issues a woman might encounter her first time—"

Prince Theodore grumbled in dismay, interrupting her cheerful explanation. "That moron...!"

Even Lady Elianna took a step back, surprised at the intensity of

his reaction.

Prince Theodore didn't seem to pay her any mind, continuing his lament. "I realize he was kept apart from you for a while, but that's no excuse for acting prematurely. Does he have no regard for you or your body? If the marquess were to learn about this...no, if the public were to learn about this... Oh, Eli, I am truly sorry. He's stained your honor as a noble lady. No, I mustn't blame you. That's inappropriate. Part of the fault lies with His Majesty and me... I was the fool for expecting people as young as the two of you to have enough self-restraint...!"

There's no way, I thought to myself, just as dumbstruck. Though perhaps that was why Lady Elianna had seemed to enjoy her time with the children so much today.

Prince Theodore suddenly lifted Lady Elianna into his arms. She seemed utterly confused at this, but he was too preoccupied babbling to himself in a panic to pay much heed to her. "You mustn't stay here. Eli, the archives are far too chilly a place for you to be loitering about right now. I forbid you to climb up the ladders either. Where is Jean? Honestly, why are all of your servants nowhere to be found? They're far too neglectful." He clicked his tongue and started forward, turning sharply. "First we have to go to the doctor. No, wait! We should consult His Majesty first." He hastened, carefully cradling the lady in his arms as he descended the stairs.

I'd never seen him so flustered before. It took me a moment to snap back to my senses and follow after them. *I guess they'll be announcing a baby before it's even time for the official wedding ceremony.* Although, given historical precedent, I wondered if officials would allow for that.

I hadn't quite lost my presence of mind to the degree Prince Theodore had, but my head was still spinning. Before I could start down the steps after them, I felt a chill in the air. My legs froze in place as I sensed a terrifying presence. I hopped into the shadows instantly, hiding myself. This was something I'd learned to do out of instinct (self-preservation) and definitely not because I was terrified of being the scapegoat for someone's anger a second time today!

I stealthily peered down, hearing the rumble of a low voice from below. "Uncle. Would you mind telling me what you're doing with *my* Eli?"

"Chris!" Prince Theodore barked the moment he saw his nephew, storming over to him with Lady Elianna still balanced in his arms. He paid no heed to the icy atmosphere. "I should be asking you something similar! What are you acting so calm for?! Aren't you worried about Eli? Don't tell me you've grown tired of her now that she's yours and you intend to abandon her? I don't remember raising you to be a barbarian! If that's all she is to you, then I will take her

myself and look after her. I won't entertain a single word you say from now on either. Is that how this is going to be? Choose your words wisely."

After that interrogatory barrage, the air around Chris turned even more menacing than before. "Uncle..." His voice was so low, so inhuman that it sounded like a whisper from the abyss. "I have absolutely no idea what you're referring to, but it seems you're taking advantage of my confusion to spout whatever drivel you want at me. When, exactly, did *you* raise *me*? I only remember you filling my head with useless nonsense as a child.

"Although that abuse you kindly hurled at me was very enlightening. Thank you, I have a very clear understanding of how you see me now. It seems you're still looking for any opportunity to come after me."

I was on the floor above them, and yet I still felt a shiver run through me. Despite the distance, I could see how Lady Elianna was trembling as well. Only Prince Theodore remained unaffected. Perhaps he possessed immunity as one of Chris's closest kin. He railed back, "Your treatment of her is far too disingenuous. Truly, for you to act oblivious after staining her honor like this—since when did you become as irresponsible and depraved as Glen? I am truly ashamed, Chris."

I sank down to my knees.

Chris also seemed suspicious. "What?" he blurted, not even trying to hide his displeasure. To no one's surprise—least of all mine—he offered no words in my defense. "I have absolutely no idea what you're babbling on about. Please don't group me with the likes of someone like Glen who's perpetually horny and hunting. Besides, you're a far worse enemy of women than he is. You may be skilled at hiding it, but I know exactly what you do when you think no one's looking. If you'd like, I can reveal everything I know right here and now. How about that?"

"Come now, don't say something so disgraceful. I don't recall any such unscrupulous behavior. I have been steadfast in my affections for one woman and one woman alone. I have nothing in common with Glen and his adulterous past. You would be hard pressed to find a man as pure and devoted to women as me. Fear not, Eli, you can entrust all of this to me."

I could already imagine a vein (audibly) bulging on Chris's forehead. Alex often sported such a vein on his head, so it was easy to picture.

Their verbal argument was gradually escalating into a sinister match between blood relatives. There was an air about Prince Theodore, though weak and difficult to notice, that he often had about

him when he teased his nephew. Chris, however, was growing increasingly more menacing, his hackles raised.

“What utter foolishness,” said Chris. “Who would entrust you with Eli? How absurd. End this farce before I become truly enraged. And anyway, how much longer do you plan to keep her in your arms while I am standing here, watching? Your actions are far more likely to stain a lady’s honor than mine.”

Just as Chris outstretched his hand toward them, Prince Theodore quickly moved away. Suspicious, the older man said, “Do you mean to tell me you’re completely ignorant of the situation? Don’t tell me you’re not the... It couldn’t be Irvin’s, could it?”

What?! I jumped in surprise before peering back down at His Highness. Irvin was the name of the Malduran prince who had visited recently in an unofficial capacity. I hadn’t spoken with him directly, but I did hear how he’d come here partly out of respect for his deceased mother. I admired the guts it must have taken for him to step into Sauslind when his own war-loving home country held no diplomatic ties with ours. From what I’d heard, he had approached Lady Elianna for political reasons, but perhaps that wasn’t entirely the case after all...?

Chris grew increasingly incensed, evident by the change in the air around him. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t bring up that distasteful name in front of me. Incorrigible... I truly have no idea what you’re yammering on about. What in the world is all of this, Uncle?”

“I wonder...” Prince Theodore’s gaze flitted between the prince and Lady Elianna, as if trying to hide the sadistic pleasure he derived from playing with Chris. “Ever since the Autumn Hunting Festival, you have been in an awfully foul mood, scowling all the time, your emotions as capricious as the sea... I wondered if perhaps you had lost control of yourself. Don’t tell me you actually forced yourself on Eli?”

“What?! Right at this very moment, *you* are the one forcing yourself on her!” Chris rounded back on him. “Cease your games and return Eli immediately!” He continued bickering with Prince Theodore, sounding like a child who had just had his prized toy taken from him.

Lady Elianna interrupted them, thrusting her book out in order to stop the two. “Your Highness! Prince Theodore! Please, both of you, cool your heads.”

Chris peered at the title on the tome and soon had the same gobsmacked look on his face that Prince Theodore had worn moments ago. “...*A Mother’s First Time Giving Birth?*”

“This is for Lady Therese who is due to give birth at the beginning of next summer. I began reading it to equip myself with relevant

knowledge ahead of time. There is little I will be able to do for her when the time comes, but added wisdom never hurts.” She turned her cold gaze to the man cradling her in his arms. “Please put me down now.”

Even Prince Theodore seemed a bit ashamed of how far he’d taken things. He gave her a strained smile and apologized. He gently deposited her onto the ground and said, “Well, I admit, I did start to second guess myself midway through... My apologies, Eli. I was curious what kind of reaction Chris might have to the news, and I got a bit carried away.”

Oh, good. So we were merely jumping to conclusions then. I felt relieved having learned the truth.

Down below, Chris fixed his uncle with a chilly look, having finally grasped the situation. “Please do something to fix that incessant and disturbing habit you have of trying to tease *me* constantly. I *am* your nephew, might I remind you. You only jumped to such a hasty and disgraceful conclusion because you’re always engaging in such unbecoming behavior. Isn’t it about time you stopped playing around and thought about your own marriage partner?”

Prince Theodore’s handsomely sculpted eyebrow quirked in response. “A certain someone has been restless ever since the Autumn Hunting Festival. That’s why I decided to investigate. Though I already have a good idea for what the cause is, Chris.” He grinned, looking as sadistic as ever. “The way you overreacted made it obvious. You’re really concerned about Irvin, aren’t you? He isn’t like the others you have easily chased away. You could feel that, couldn’t you? Irvin wasn’t raised in the comfort and luxury of a palace; he grew up surrounded by prejudice and contempt and came out all the tougher for it. Even as a man yourself, you have to admit he has a certain charm to him. And ever since he suggested he might kidnap Eli and steal her away, you’ve been panicking inwardly—beset with a sense of impending danger. Well, did I guess right?”

I shivered. The air in the room turned sharp and cold, like a blade pressing against my throat.

To simplify, up until now, Chris had felt invincible, wearing a mask of composure on his face. The reason for his sudden mood swings was because all of that had changed once he found himself a worthy adversary. He most likely wouldn’t admit as much here out of stubbornness, though.

Thinking back, this foreigner was the man who had rescued Lady Elianna in her time of need. Alan’s report of the incident had likely made Chris panic further.

I gave an audible gulp, feeling a tension between the three below

that had never existed there before. Chris had an impenetrable presence about him, wearing the same rigid expression he wore when engaging in political affairs. “Uncle, I would like to echo those words right back at you. I’m not as foolish as a certain someone who stood by and did nothing as the woman he loved was stolen away from him. Instead, I suggest we teach such would-be thieves a lesson.”

“Everyone knows it’s the hero’s duty to rescue the princess from her demon lord captor. It’s only just. In fact, maybe I should consider participating myself?”

“There’s no need for an old man like you to needlessly expose yourself to danger,” said Chris. “If you push yourself, you could injure your hips. You’re only *slightly* younger than my father. If you were to fall and injure yourself, why, it’d be an unspeakable stain on *your* honor.”

“You sure are emphasizing my age, aren’t you? The fact that you’re treating me like a feeble old man when I’m not even that much older than you is proof you feel threatened by me. It doesn’t particularly upset me though. When I think about how you would still sneak into my bed at night because you were too afraid to sleep alone, even as you got older, I cannot help but smile.”

“The fact that you bring up stories like that is proof you *are* old.”

The two were having a literal mud-slinging party down there that didn’t seem likely to end any time soon. That wasn’t the reason for my cold sweat though; if they continued this, they might really delve into a topic too crude for a lady’s ears. However, unlike Alex, I didn’t possess an immunity to the bone-chilling aura emanating from His Highness that all the prince’s kin seemed born with.

I could feel the beads of sweat drip down as I contemplated making a courageous withdrawal (retreat). But before I could act, a quiet voice cut through the air and brought the quarreling to an end.

“Prince Christopher, Prince Theodore.” Her voice was like that of a goddess, filled with gentle affection. Their gazes turned toward her, and she offered them one of her rare smiles. “Might you allow me to say one thing?”

Her adorable expression was enough to soften the hard lines that had formed on their faces. Drawn in by the aura of calm surrounding her, both men swallowed a breath. Her eyes narrowed as she cracked down on the both of them. “Talking in the archives is prohibited. If you would like to continue fussing at one another, please do so outside.” She seemed unusually angry—though whether that was because they were needlessly squabbling and had swept her into it or because they had interrupted her reading time, I couldn’t say for sure.

As she turned to make her leave, both men attempted to call after her at the same time. Perfectly in sync, the two then proceeded to

bristle and glare at one another.

Lady Elianna suddenly turned back toward them, as if remembering something. “One more thing, Prince Theodore. Please be sure to pick up the books you dropped earlier and inspect them for possible damage. Prince Christopher, please return to your administrative work before Lord Alexei comes calling after you. As for Lord Glen, he may have his reputation called into question over his love affairs, but even on his days off, he honorably carries out the duties expected of him. He is far more praiseworthy than either of you, in my opinion.”

“...!”

This time, all three of us gulped. I could feel my heart skip a beat. I never dreamed Lady Elianna would ever stand up for me like that. It made me happy...though I was terrified of what might result from it. Chris and Prince Theodore silently exchanged a look. It felt like the two were conspiring with one another, though perhaps that was simply my imagination.

I stepped away from the stair landing, but then I ran into Lady Elianna as she came back upstairs. “Oh, Lord Glen.” She blinked, perhaps surprised to see me here in the archives, of all places.

I gave her a troubled smile, unsure if I should bring up what had just transpired. When I realized what she was staring at and that she’d grown quiet, my hand immediately shot up to my cheek. The pain was gone by now, but the mark probably still lingered. It seemed like such a waste after she had gone out of her way to stick up for me like that. Very rarely did I regret my illicit adventures, but this was one of those times. “Uh, well, you see...”

Maybe I should apologize to her directly instead of trying to come up with excuses. After all, a compassionate goddess would reach out the hand of salvation to someone who is repentant, right?

“Perfect timing, Lord Glen.”

“Huh?”

“Do you remember that play I spoke of before—the one for the children at the facility? If possible, I would like to request the cooperation of the royal guard for it. This would allow you and the others to bond with the children, plus I know they would enjoy it too if you were to participate. I wanted to consult you before I asked His Highness about the matter.”

I could already see exactly how this was going to play out. Chris wouldn’t let his precious, precious betrothed take on the role of the miserly old hag. The ghost role was out of the question too. I had no doubt he’d make those of us in his personal guard comply—meaning *I* would be the one to play the hag. As I pictured the bitter fate awaiting my comrades and me, I recalled one of the passages contained in the

book *The Holy Night's Keys* that Lady Elianna had read to the children:

And so, the old woman took the three keys she had received from the ghosts—each respectively representing the past, present, and future—and repented for what she had done. She apologized to everyone for her horrible misdeeds, and they enjoyed a feast on the Holy Night together.

Seeing the smile on Lady Elianna's (the Goddess's) face, I realized my true trial was to go and apologize to the women I'd wronged. My heart felt far heavier now than it had at any other point that day. I almost felt like crying at the misfortune that awaited me in my future; surely the two men on the stairs below required penance far more than I did.

Today was finally supposed to be my day off. I should have been reveling in the freedom of it. I should have been released from the grueling mental torture that came with my job. So why...? Why did my day off feel like more of a slog than the days when I was on duty?

Someone, please, tell me... What happened to my mental tranquility?

Arc 3: The Desire to Cheat

Autumn's colorful leaves were gone. The wind had turned as cold as a knife, a clear indication winter's footsteps would soon be heard marching across the land. It was during this time between seasons that a certain incident occurred.

Upon our return from the Autumn Hunting Festival, I found myself bogged down with the task of document sorting, just as busy as the other gentlemen hard at work in the capital. Yes, that's right. For some reason, I was currently in Lord Alexei Strasser's office.

"Lady Elianna, once you finish organizing the cabinet on the right side, take these letters to the Financial Affairs Office and bring back their reports. On your way back, retrieve some materials for me from the archives as well. Have you finished the investigation I requested of you? The one regarding issues with bridge construction. Oh, also, there are some documents over on that desk that I'll be needing for my afternoon meeting. Please see that there are an appropriate number of copies."

It was a dizzying number of orders to be given all at once. Nonetheless, I managed a nod as I cradled a mountain of documents in my arms. In these past several hours, I'd learned not responding to his requests meant the work would just pile up even more.

His subordinates gave me sympathetic looks, but none of them had the spare time to assist me. They were all buried in towers of paperwork themselves. Everyone was silent. They had a grave air about them, as if they knew one mistake would be an enormous setback.

There were rumors that only the most elite men were working for Lord Alexei. Now that I had experienced this for myself, I understood why.

Anyway, I need to take care of these documents.

I turned around but failed to notice the paper at my feet. If this were a scene out of one of my cousin's romance novels, it would play something like this: I would slip, sending the sheaf of papers in my arms scattering through the air as I reeled back. The entire room would be bathed in an ice-cold silence. Lord Alexei's eyes would have a frozen glaze as he watched, inwardly labeling me a klutz for my ineptitude.

Alas, while I did nearly fall, there was a reference book in my

arms I couldn't bear to see damaged. I staggered, trying to regain my balance by hopping back a few steps. I wound up stomping over something else and slamming against the wall, but at least I didn't fall. No sooner did I breathe a sigh of relief than I could feel a chill emanating from above.

"You are truly dexterous. Now I understand why others have told me to watch out for your footwork, Lady Elianna."

Startled, I looked up to find two eyes as icy blue as a frozen lake staring down at me. They looked right at home on that cool, composed face of his.

"U-Um..."

This situation was also similar to a scene from one of my cousin's books as well. The protagonist, in her clumsiness, left such an impression on the hero that love bloomed between them.

...Yes, well, that certainly isn't happening here. The main problem, before we even consider who the protagonist might be, is Lord Alexei himself. I realize it may be rude of me to say, but it's a bit hard to picture him talking about love. Almost as difficult as picturing Lord Glen doing the same, despite him constantly soliciting other women.

It was hard to believe Lord Alexei was related to someone as bubbly and animated as Lady Therese. The world certainly was full of mysteries.

As I was busy pondering romance, Lord Alexei asked matter-of-factly, "Would you kindly remove your foot?"

I snapped out of my reverie. "My apologies..." In my panic, I nearly lost my footing again, but this time, Lord Alexei's arm saved me.

"Please don't cause any unnecessary trouble for me."

I shrunk under his cold gaze, but then an even chillier voice rang out.

Is Lord Alexei's office some kind of an ice box?

"This surely is an unpleasant sight." I glanced back to find that Prince Christopher had entered at some point, a stack of documents in his hand. He smiled brilliantly, despite how bitter his remark had sounded. There was something disquieting about the look he aimed at Lord Alexei.

"Mere coincidence, I assure you." Unfazed, Lord Alexei removed the hand he'd been using to support me and took the documents from the prince instead.

Prince Christopher fixed him with an annoyed look but then just as quickly slipped in behind me and snaked his arms around my waist. His husky voice drifted into my ear. "Eli, you weren't in the archives, so I came looking for you. You don't have to toil away here working in Alex's office. If you're looking to aid anyone, I'd prefer you assist me."

My heart drummed instantly, though my reaction was dampened somewhat by Lord Alexei's cool response.

"Please don't speak such nonsense so boldly. If Lady Elianna were to work as your aid, you would fawn over her and neglect your duties—an end result so obvious even a five-year-old could anticipate it. Besides, whose fault do you think it is that our workload is so backed up in the first place? And you mean to tell me, in the midst of all of this, you had enough free time to go snooping around the archives looking for Lady Elianna?"

The prince ignored the implied lecture and chilly air emanating from his childhood friend. He instead peeked over my shoulder, peering into my face. "Eli, don't you think you'd find it more worthwhile helping me than this snowman here?"

There was a popping sound as a vein bulged on Alexei's forehead. "Unbelievable," he scoffed quietly. "What is with you? Ever since you returned from the Autumn Hunting Festival, you have been unrestrained. Unhinged, even, Your Highness."

Those words sent a jolt through me, my back stiffening. The prince's blue eyes narrowed as he watched me. Sweat trickled down my back. I felt cornered.

"Hey, Eli," His Highness called, smiling at me. There was an intensity, a heat hidden within his eyes. His voice sounded entirely unamused as he asked, "Do you remember asking me about 'the desire to cheat'?"

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The incident in question took place during the height of summer, when the nights were still short and the days were long. On that particular day, I received a notice that someone would be coming to visit, so I buried myself in books to bide my time. Someone then came bursting through the door like a raging storm.

"Lady Elianna! You must hear this!" The lady in question was Lord Alexei's younger sister, Lady Therese. Her dignified features were drawn almost terrifyingly taut into an intense expression.

The two of us were close in age and had been close ever since I was first named the prince's betrothed. She was one of the few people in the world I could call a friend.

I was taken aback by the menacing look on her face but nonetheless inquired, "What's the matter?"

All the vigor she had burst in with built until she suddenly exploded, like a volcano erupting. "That man—he's been cheating on me!" She shrieked so loudly our quiet residence seemed to rumble from the force of it. The volume was at such a level that it was akin to front row seats at a theater. My eardrums were still ringing, leaving

me dazed.

After she broke into sobs, I finally asked, “Cheating? Earl Ardolino?” I couldn’t help the disbelief that surely filtered through my voice when I spoke.

Three years ago at the age of sixteen, Lady Therese had married a man over ten years her senior—Earl Ardolino. The earl was a renowned businessman working in foreign trade and very rarely stayed in the capital. He spent over half his time either abroad or out at sea. I could count the number of times I had actually met the man on one hand. Still, he had seemed like a very upstanding and honest gentleman, hence my doubt.

Lady Therese turned her teary eyes up at me, fury shining in them. “I’m positive. Recently, he’s been coming home late every night, and to add to that, he...he always reeks of women’s perfume!”

“Oh...”

Though I still thought it a bit hasty to label him an adulterer at this stage, I could see Earl Ardolino perhaps visiting a pleasure house for work reasons.

Lady Therese must have been able to read the subdued look on my face. There was a disquieting color to her eyes. “You simply don’t get it, Lady Elianna. Men are cheaters at heart. Certainly, they’re fine in the beginning. When you’re newly married, they shower you with so much affection you could fill a dozen empty honey pots and then some. But men don’t like security, they like the thrill of something new! Things will seem smooth at first, and they’ll say they like the comfort of being with you. Soon enough, though, they’re hooked on sleeping around with other women!”

She exclaimed it all with such alarm that it left me recoiling. “Um... But not all men in the world are like that.” I recalled my most recent exchanges with Prince Christopher, and blood rushed to my cheeks.

My knowledge of romance came from the novels my aunt and cousins had recommended to me. Actually being in such an affectionate relationship was much different from reading about it. It left you gasping for breath, your heart pounding, your eyes spinning. It was riveting and yet terrifying—almost like the sweet embrace of death was coming for you. At least, that had been my daily experience. I never dreamed it would be so extreme. Yes, I had underestimated just how accurate the depictions in the novels would be, and I was reminded of my folly daily.

Lately, things had only intensified with His Highness. How best to put it... It was as if he was making up for the past four years—no, ten, in fact—by fawning over me excessively. The moment the two of us were alone together, he would draw close to me with his radiant smile

and sweet words. I was left panicked for how to respond, unaccustomed to such attention. Frankly, I was grateful to Lady Therese for giving me an excuse not to visit the palace today.

Said friend was, for some reason, clenching her fists as she continued to emphasize her earlier point. “You simply don’t understand men at all. Once you’ve been married for three years, that’s when the desire to cheat comes out!”

“‘Desire to cheat’...?”

“Yes,” said Lady Therese. “Like a silent plague. At first it shows no sign of itself, keeping hidden, luring the wife into a false sense of security, then BAM! It festers like an open wound. This is historical knowledge that has been passed down across the continents. The most irritating part is he thinks I still haven’t realized what he’s doing!”

“I see...” I wondered if this same “desire to cheat” would appear in Prince Christopher as well. There were certainly more worthy women out there in the world, more enchanting ones than someone like me—a Bibliophile Princess.

Still, I can hardly imagine it.. I thought, recalling an exchange we’d had earlier.

This was at the beginning of summer when we’d disguised ourselves and sneaked off to the Roma market with some bodyguards in tow. The prince had forbidden me from calling him “His Highness,” instead insisting I use a nickname. I’d struggled to comply at first. It ate at me that Lady Irene had called him using a nickname first, and it gave me displeasure to have to use it.

Instinctively, I turned away from him and huffed, “No, thank you.”

The prince blinked for a moment before pressing in on me with that gleaming smile of his. “Then why don’t we see how long you can stand me touching you before you finally decide to call me by my nickname, hm?” Thus began his probing caresses in the name of “punishment.”

“*Lady Elianna...*” a voice cut in, breaking me out of my reverie.

I pressed my hands over my heated cheeks and peered up at her.

Lady Therese was seated across from me with a terrifying expression on her face. There was an ominous aura swirling around her like a vortex. There was such an energy behind it I feared she might transform into some kind of beast. That wouldn’t do.

“Um, so then, Lady Therese, what is it you would like to do about your husband’s infidelity?”

There was a dark gleam in her eyes as she stood up, her hand in a fist. “Simple! I will catch him at the scene of the crime so he’s got nowhere to run, then I’ll discipline him. He will never want to cheat again by the time I’m through! I will *not* turn a blind eye to this!”

Having declared that, she dragged me along with her to her carriage. The two of us rode to the earl's work area, where Lady Therese suspected we might be likely to catch him in the act.

According to Lady Therese, there was a suspicious woman hanging around the earl. She mentioned she had seen the two of them ride in the same carriage before, but when she inquired as to the woman's identity, he had brushed her off, stubbornly insisting it was none of her business.

"Not very 'manly' of him. If he has a lover, he should just come right out and say it," scoffed Lady Therese.

Suddenly, we had gone from suspecting him of infidelity to being convinced he had a lover. *What on earth are we doing*, I wondered. It was too late to second guess; Lady Therese had already dragged me this far. She had even threatened the earl's coachman, using her status as a wife. When she grilled him about where her husband and this woman were "always sneaking off to" (Lady Therese's words, not mine), the man informed her about a certain location in the warehouse district.

We arrived at the place in question in an inconspicuous carriage she had prepared, knowing an ordinary noble's carriage would call too much attention. The two of us were technically of high status; I was the betrothed to the crown prince, and Lady Therese was the wife of an earl. Normally, we would never be allowed to step outside unattended. It was due to Lady Therese's insistence that her maids stayed behind, and so the only person accompanying the two of us was my manservant.

Jean, in his usual fashion, was as unenthusiastic and nonchalant as ever. He seemed to recognize our outing was a little atypical, but that hardly fazed him. At my behest, he left the carriage to check if Earl Ardolino was in his office.

We were waiting inside the carriage for his return when Lady Therese suddenly burst out, "It's that woman...!" She went flying out of the carriage, chasing after her husband's supposed lover. Flustered, I hurried to follow her as the coachman called after us, urging us to come back.

Lady Therese's pursuit of the woman led her inside one of the warehouses, where I caught up with her. The place was loaded with wooden crates. The light was dim, given that the sun was beginning to set. It appeared we had timed it perfectly for her husband leaving his office. Workers were scarce by this hour, so there was no one to reprimand us for our intrusion as we made our way deeper inside the building.

I wonder if this counts as trespassing...? Lady Therese is with me, and

since she's the owner's wife, I don't suppose we'd be taken in for breaking the law, I thought. My heart was pounding; I had never experienced anything like this before.

Lady Therese seemed oblivious to my mental state as she continued stalking the woman in question through the shadows. I had caught a glimpse of her as well. Albeit from a distance, the woman did look quite provocative. I did think it presumptuous (and inconsiderate) to judge at a mere glance, but she didn't appear to be of noble standing. Still, she also didn't seem to be a worker here either.

The woman in question moved into the most deserted recesses of the warehouse, where she met up with a man. Apparently this had been a planned encounter because a smile broke out on her face. The gentleman in question had light brown hair and an earnest look on his face—a face that seemed to be contorted in displeasure. The two exchanged a few words before she looped her arm with his. Then they disappeared through a different door than they had entered.

I recognized the man without any prompting from Lady Therese—it was Earl Ardolino.

Lady Therese broke out of her daze and flew after the two, but I could tell it was already too late. The door locked as it closed, leaving us unable to follow after them. When we tried to trace our steps back to the other entrance, we found a large shuttered door had been drawn over it, proof the workday here in the warehouse district had ended.

~.~.~.~

We stood there at a loss, now completely trapped inside of the warehouse. The light spilling in from outside grew increasingly dim as it receded across the dirt floor beneath our feet. The already sparsely populated warehouse district only grew more deserted as night wore on in the capital. Though it was still midsummer, this district was located at the edge of a river. A moist, penetratingly cold air invaded the area.

Even I felt a bit anxious, steeped in a sense of shame. How could such a blockheaded person such as myself be the crown prince's betrothed?

Beside me, I heard a similarly gloomy voice say, "I'm sorry for all of this, Lady Elianna..." She seemed to be dejected over having dragged me into it. Gone was the crazed zeal from before which she had displayed when we first rode into the district.

I gazed at her face, illuminated only by the faint trickle of light through a tall window above us. "Lady Therese, what was it you truly hoped to accomplish?"

She had gone on and on about cheating, but something about it hadn't felt genuine to me. Perhaps because I had seen the shock register on her face earlier when she saw the two of them together for herself—the reality of it had been undeniable. I could relate to how she felt, having experienced something similar before.

Lady Therese's ordinarily courageous expression had diminished into a fleeting smile. "Our marriage was forced onto him. He didn't want me."

Excuse me...?

"Three years ago, he...Oscar and I met, and I fell in love at first sight. Up until then, people had coddled me for being a duke's daughter, for being related to the royal family. I was even accustomed to the men in high society lavishing me with their attention as well. I thought I could have anything I wished for.

"Then I met Oscar. The first time we spoke, he wore a look of displeasure and completely brushed me off. Incensed, I wanted to find a way to get under that curmudgeon's skin... So, during that first meeting, I demanded he marry me."

"Oh goodness..." I was surprised. I knew the engagement had been rather sudden, but I'd had no idea that was the reason for it.

Lady Therese smiled sadly. "Oscar just gave a lukewarm 'Very well.' Now that I think back on it, he probably agreed because the Strasser name would benefit his business. At the time, I just desperately wanted to turn his attention toward me. I didn't actually realize at first that I had fallen for him. I was such a child."

Her dignified, mahogany-colored eyes shifted listlessly to the floor. Knowing how animated she always was, seeing her like this made my heart ache.

"I knew this was how things would end up from the beginning. He always treated me like a child and never involved me in conversations about his work. He would bring me gifts but ignore me the rest of the time. It's only natural he'd find another woman. I... If only I had as much knowledge as you, Lady Elianna, then maybe I could have engaged him in conversation. Maybe then he could have consulted me about his work. Maybe he might have actually looked my way. Maybe...he would have treated me as an adult, an adult *woman*. I... I..."

Large teardrops came bursting forth, rolling down her cheeks. I grabbed her hand in mine and squeezed. I was frustrated at myself for not realizing sooner how much she had been agonizing over this. "Lady Therese..."

I searched for some words of consolation, but I was too awkward at this kind of thing. Nothing was coming to mind. I was a novice myself when it came to matters of the heart. It was absurd to think I

would be able to offer her solid advice here.

Right as I was reaching my wits end for what to do, I heard a voice filter in through the tall window above.

“M’lady? Are you in there?” It was Jean’s voice. After I replied, he continued in the sort of dispassionate tone one might expect from a member of the Bernstein family. “Huh, and here I thought you only got yourself locked inside of libraries. I’ll go fetch a key, so just wait for a little bit!” He sounded so carefree.

Lady Therese shouted, “You can’t!” After a moment, she continued. “You can’t. You absolutely cannot. There is no way I can show myself in front of him looking this shameful right now. He can’t learn I came here to catch him in the act only to disgrace myself by getting locked in this warehouse. I’d be a laughingstock! Absolutely not...!”

Hmm... I pondered, using my bibliophile brain to the best of its abilities. For Lady Therese, her pride and her feelings for Earl Ardolino were at odds with one another. I looked at her, sincerity in my eyes. “What truly matters most here is Earl Ardolino’s feelings, no?”

Since I was born a noble, I had both the necessary determination and the sense of responsibility toward the role expected of me. It wasn’t even really an option. But as a living, breathing human being, I also understood there were times when a person’s feelings toward someone else exceeded duty and pride. What was really important right now? She couldn’t lose sight of that.

There was a thoughtful look in Lady Therese’s eyes.

I could hear a sigh trickle in from the high window. “Hey, m’lady... Can you come close to the window?”

I tilted my head slightly. There were three wooden crates stacked nearby, so it was likely *possible* for me to do so. It seemed my unladylike physical prowess would once again come in handy. I clambered onto the crates, but there was still some distance between me and the window even after I reached the top. Nonetheless, I called out to him, “All right, Jean. Now what?”

“For now, I’ll at least toss you some light. I figure it’s gotta be pitch black in there.” No sooner had he said it than I heard something whooshing through air, followed promptly by the jarring sound of something snapping. I blinked. Water suddenly came gushing down over me.

“Ah, crap,” came Jean’s panicked voice after a moment. “I broke the rain gutter. My aim was a little off. You okay, m’lady?”

I wiped off my face with my hands as I replied to him, “Yes, I’m all right.”

“Kay, let’s try this again then.”

Next, I felt something slam against my forehead. It was a leather bag that Jean had chucked through the open window. He somehow managed to hit me dead center in the head with an appropriate *thwump* to accompany the impact.

As if narrating what had happened, a quiet voice outside remarked, "That was a loud thwump."

...Does this manservant have some kind of grudge against me?

"Everythin' okay, m'lady?" he asked in that breezy tone of his.

When I inquired how we might escape from our prison, Jean informed me this warehouse was connected to an outbuilding that looked like a factory. He advised me to make my way there. After confirming the direction of our destination, I scaled back down the boxes. One of the boxes must have lost its balance in the process, because there was a noisy creak as it and its contents fell on top of me.

"Oh no...! Are you all right, Lady Elianna?!"

Today certainly was turning out to be an unfortunate one.

As I responded to Lady Therese, I noticed a sudden smell wafting through the air. The crate and its contents didn't hurt; it seemed fruit had been stored inside it. I slipped a simple candlestick out of the bag Jean provided us and lit it.

"You must be accustomed to this," Lady Therese said, impressed.

Most noble ladies didn't light candles themselves. Back at our regional library, the staff would often forget I was inside and lock me in. Since then, the members of my household had always forced me to carry a candle with me.

"...This is neneli fruit."

It was similar in nature to a currant, with a dark red color, almost the size of a strawberry. From what I'd read in my books, they differed from the currant in that they weren't eaten but rather used in dyes. I found myself a bit confused. These fruits were produced in the northern Tor Region, which was also where most dyes were made. Why would they be here in the capital...?

Beside me, Lady Therese suddenly clamped a hand over her mouth and slid down to her knees, as if suddenly overcome by nausea.

"Lady Therese!" I hastened to her side. Even in the dim light of my candle, I could see that her face was pale.

"The smell..."

I pulled her along and we left that scene behind us. "Are you feeling a bit better now?"

"Yes. I'm sorry for causing you such trouble." Even just walking proved difficult as she wobbled along. It seemed she really wasn't feeling well.

"I'll go get some help."

I tried to leave her behind, but she stared after me with a frightened look on her face. "But Lady Elianna...what if something suddenly jumps out at me?"

I blinked and considered her question for a moment. "You needn't worry," I finally assured. "According to *A Hundred Tales of Mystery in the Capital*, which was just recently published, the only thing that haunts the warehouse district is a plate-spinning specter that pulls people into the river if they get too close. It won't show up inside of a building like this though."

"...You know, it's occurred to me before, but you really do have odd taste when it comes to books."

I transferred the flame of my current candle to a brand new one and placed it at Lady Therese's feet. "I'll return as soon as I can." After that, I immediately set off in the direction Jean had advised me to go. He mentioned there seemed to be some people still in the factory area adjoined to this building. The fact they were still working even after dark meant Earl Ardolino's company certainly had some diligent employees.

I hadn't yet found the factory area, but as I got close, I noticed light spilling in from a separate path leading outside. I could hear the sound of three men who I assumed to be patrolling the place. Relieved to have found some people, I started toward them.

"...I'm telling you, that bit about a monster that can stretch her neck out like that, it's all hogwash. I'll bet you ten dora."

"Ten dora? You cheap bastard. I'll bet ya fifty dora on the cryin' lady."

"Hey, hey, hold on there guys," said a slightly pretentious voice as a third man joined in. "Why, in the first place, are all these apparitions women, huh? I'm thinkin' it's because women hold in so much bitterness and resentment."

"Pfft. And who do you think is contributing to that bitterness and resentment, huh? You were gettin' into fights in the red-light district just recently."

"Don't get your trousers in a twist just because you're jealous of my popularity. Now, you gonna bet or what? Will we see a female ghost or a male ghost?"

"Hold up. That's not a bet then. I think this whole spirit talk is rubbish to begin with."

"You just don't get it..."

Their ghost discussion threatened to drag on endlessly. I decided to intervene rather than shamefully eavesdrop at length. I pressed the candle close to my breast so the light of it wouldn't surprise them when I stepped closer, then I called "Excuse me..."



All three of them peered back at me. Their eyes widened and their mouths dropped the second they spotted me. Their shrill screams rang out in unison, echoing through the dark stillness of the warehouse district.

I stood there, dumbstruck.

All three men scrambled away from me as if fleeing for their lives. "It's a ghost!" was understandable; I'd heard that before. But the other, "Mummy hewp meeee!" was unrecognizable. Perhaps a language I wasn't yet familiar with.

While I did hold the unflattering epithet of the Library Ghost, this was the first time I had ever received this kind of reaction. I blinked and felt something trickle down onto my eyelid. I wiped and discovered it was neneli juice. The fruit in the crate from before must have been ripe and splattered onto me when it fell.

With the help of the dim outside light and my candle, I checked the rest of my body to find myself coated in the substance. If only this were wine covering me, then I might be able to call myself Oenophile Princess rather than Bibliophile Princess.

I pulled out a handkerchief and began wiping myself down when I suddenly heard an exasperated voice remark, "What in the world are you doin', m'lady?" Jean had apparently come around the outside of the building to meet me.

I informed him that Lady Therese was inside and feeling unwell. He started in her direction before pausing to glance back. "Ah, time's up."

~.~.~.~

I stared after him and tilted my head in confusion. Noise suddenly broke out around the warehouse district. Horses approached as Glen and the rest of his guard rode in. Leading them was none other than Prince Christopher himself.

"Eli!" His appearance could draw people's attention even through the darkness. I immediately felt my pulse quicken. He slipped off his horse and hurried over to me. Soon his arms were around me in an embrace, and I thought my heart might beat right out of my chest. "We got a report from the Bernstein residence that you still hadn't come home. Please...don't worry me like this." He let out a breathy sigh of relief.

My cheeks lit up as I apologized. I figured it was probably best I not pursue the matter of how he managed to locate me.

"Oh dear, Your Highness..." Lady Therese exclaimed in surprise. She was leaning on Jean for support as she stepped out of the warehouse.

The prince's vivid blue eyes turned sharp as he looked over at her.

Earl Ardolino also showed up, perhaps drawn over by the fuss—he was the man in charge here, after all. “Therese,” he gasped when he saw her. He gave a nod of acknowledgment toward His Highness, but then his face contorted in confusion. It was little surprise he seemed completely baffled as to what was going on. After all, his wife was here alongside the country's prince, the prince's betrothed, and a platoon of royal guards.

Lady Therese, conversely, actually calmed once she saw her husband. She pulled herself upright, looking as dignified and untouchable as she always did without losing the bright cheerfulness that was essential to her character. Then she confronted her husband. “My dear... Lord Oscar.”

Earl Ardolino winced.

She kept her eyes on him as she continued. “I have loved everything about you since the moment we first met. The fact that you don't smile easily, the fact that you're always so formal and ill-humored. Even how passionate and focused you are on your work—all of it.” The way she smiled was so melancholy it made even my heart ache.

Lady Therese continued. “But let's end this now. If we continue like this, I feel like my feelings for you will overpower me, and I'll lose my mind. I have already involved my friend in all of this, who knows what I might get myself into next... I've been such a child and yet you have humored my whims for the past three years. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for that.” She bowed her head gracefully.

Earl Ardolino just stared, frozen and wide-eyed.

I slipped outside of the halo of the prince's cloak, unable to stand by any longer. I moved toward my friend, a neneli fruit in my hand. “Lady Therese, please wait.”

“Lady Elianna?”

“Earl Ardolino,” I turned to him. “Do you plan to begin some kind of business in the near future using the neneli fruit?”

“No, the fruit is only used for making dyes.”

I cocked my head to the side. I wasn't that well-educated in business matters, but Lady Therese was one of my dearest friends. “There was a book published last year by Lee Turner entitled *Sea and Land Animal Journal*. According to what's written within, overhunting of musk deer and beavers has become a problem in recent years. Restrictions will most likely be put in place soon so people cannot hunt them purely to extract their glands for perfume creation.

“What you said was true; the neneli fruit is used for making dyes. I read that a song about incense has been circulating up in the north

between the dyers, referring to how the fruit's fragrance seeps into fabric. My lord, are you planning to use the fruit to develop a new, natural perfume?"

Lady Therese glanced over at the earl.

He remained silent as the sultry woman from before smiled warmly at him and said, "If they've already figured out this much, you may as well divulge everything."

The guards' eyes gathered on the woman's ample bosom.

Men certainly are honest with what they want, I thought. Though, I was more interested in where she'd suddenly come from. I hadn't noticed she was here until just now.

Lady Therese's face was still pale, and since she made no move to say anything, I spoke in her stead. "Pardon me, but might I inquire as to what your profession is, Miss?"

She stared back at me, eyes colored with amusement. An air of sexy mystique emanated from her. "I'm a perfumer."

So I was right.

The woman flashed a beguiling smile my way. "I may not have the level of education as yourself or the earl's young wife here, but I'm one of the most skilled perfumers in the country. When the earl here made such an earnest appeal for my help, I wondered what he could possibly want. He told me he wanted to develop a perfume under his beloved wife's name and send it to her. Honestly, I laughed. I couldn't believe someone of his age was saying something so corny."

Lady Therese's eyes widened then fixed on her husband. "Lord Oscar...is this true?"

Earl Ardolino's stiff brows furrowed, his gaze swimming. He still hadn't opened his mouth.

I gave a small sigh as I reached over and deposited the neneli fruit in Lady Therese's hand. "Did you know this fruit has the same meaning as the currant in the language of flowers?"

The earl's eyes turned to me.

My lips tugged into a faint smile. "When the fruit is still green and not yet ripe enough for consumption, its sharp thorns and acidic flavor convey the message 'I suffer when you're upset.' Conversely, when it's sweet and ripe, the message is 'I want to bring you joy.' It fits the two of you perfectly."

Lady Therese gripped the fruit in her hand.

I stepped back, and Prince Christopher wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

There was a tentative tremor in Lady Therese's voice as she asked, "Have I been able to bring you joy?"

The earl sighed. He exhaled as if he were letting something go, as if he'd given up on something. "I'm over ten years older than you."

Lady Therese's eyes wavered with emotion. She didn't understand what he was trying to say.

There was a tinge of something painful in Earl Ardolino's voice as he spoke. "Other lords might be able to bring you happiness with their words, but I cannot. I'm a boring man completely immersed in my work. I know that better than anyone. The people call you the 'flower of high society.' You deserve better than me. And yet I still couldn't give up on you. You're dignified, like a flower so pristine and beyond my reach; *I* was the one yearning for you."

"My lord..."

He returned her gaze and wrapped his hand around hers, covering the fruit she was carrying. "I have to leave the house all the time because of work. That's why I wanted to at least create this fragrance for you, so I could leave a part of me with you. My joy is in coming home, knowing you're waiting there for me."

Lady Therese's lips trembled as though she might break out into tears at any moment. In response, Lord Ardolino threw his arms around her, and the two shared a tight embrace.

Almost like a grand finale, I thought to myself. It was probably best to leave the two of them alone now.

At His Highness's behest, the rest of us left the area. Though for some reason the prince was mumbling, "Using a fragrance to mark what's yours..." I had no earthly clue what he was on about. He gave a strained smile when he noticed me staring. "Well...it seems although my cousin may appear mature for her age, she was completely oblivious to her husband's feelings."

"Your Highness, did you already know all of this?"

"Of course. Why else would he have been approved to marry the daughter of a duke?" He also casually added, "Alex may not seem it, but he fawns over his little sister quite a bit. Not that anyone else could tell by looking."

We headed for a carriage Jean had prepared for us. On the way, I spotted the guards trying to make a pass at the perfumer we'd seen before.

There was something that had niggled at the back of my mind ever since Lady Therese's initial visit today. I decided to bring it up with the prince. "Your Highness?"

"Hm?" His response was relaxed, his eyes focused on me.

"I heard that after three years of a man being married, the 'desire to cheat' overcomes them. Is this true?"

A cold darkness swelled in his blue eyes. I got the sense I was treading dangerous ground, but my question was out of genuine curiosity.

Nearby, Jean drew in a sigh and mumbled, "She brought this on

herself.”

Prince Christopher’s lips twitched, smiling over at me. “All right, Eli. I see how this is.”

How what is? I wondered.

“I was actually restraining myself. I figured I would frighten you, given how inexperienced you are, if I acted too persistent with my affections. But I’ve committed a cardinal sin indeed if I’ve caused you to doubt me. Well then. It seems I should show you exactly how deep my feelings for you are so you never even have the chance to second guess them.”

...Pardon?

“Why don’t you stay the night at the palace, Eli?”

“Uh, um...Your Highness?”

I might be mistaken, but it seems as if this conversation is suddenly going in an entirely different direction?

The prince helped me into the carriage then followed in behind me, shutting the door behind us. “Don’t worry. We’ll have plenty of time together.” He wore a gleaming smile.

After recalling the events of that past summer, I could feel a cold sweat rolling down my back. Lady Therese’s pregnancy was later confirmed, though the joy I felt in that positive news was short lived. I learned a valuable lesson that day: a lady shouldn’t be unprepared when bringing up her misgivings with a man. Prince Christopher also made me swear to him I wouldn’t doubt his feelings again, though he did later return me to my home that night.

This time, I hadn’t said anything so ill-advised, but the moment Lord Alexei brought up the Autumn Hunting Festival, I got a keen sense of danger. This was in part because of what Prince Theodore had said in the archives just the other day.

The prince stood in front of me, trapping me with his sparkling smile. “You know, Eli, you were worried about men having the desire to cheat back then, but it goes the other way as well. You never know when a woman might be taken by the urge to commit infidelity either. Am I right?”

“I-I would never do something like...”

“Oh? Then why don’t you prove it to me. Just as I made sure you could believe me back then, why don’t you prove to me that I can believe you now?”

I was so surprised that my words stumbled over themselves. “You want me to take the lead...?!”

“Yes.” His smile almost seemed to glow and dazzle. He appeared perfectly relaxed—what part of this was “unhinged”?

Everyone in the room politely turned their eyes away. “He’s the

one that has the lead here,” they mumbled.

The prince didn’t even seem to notice them as he continued his offensive. “I know you can do it, Eli. After all, it wasn’t that long ago you—”

“Y-Y-Your Highness!” I gasped, panicked.

Nearby, the master of this office was massaging his forehead, a frosty aura billowing around him. “I told you to get back to work,” he hissed. “You’re nuisances, the both of you!”

Come to think of it, there was another ghost story that began making the rounds after that summer. One involving the warehouse district. They said there was a girl who drowned herself in the Neville River. She would appear with blood trickling down from her head, looking to possess any man that dared make a woman cry.

As the prince himself said, the capital also hosted its own real abominable snowman (Lord Alexei), so perhaps Sauslind was a treasure trove of other hauntings as well. The day when *One Hundred New Tales of Mystery in the Capital* would be published couldn’t be far off.

Afterword

Hello! I'm Yui, the author that wishes she could hibernate like a bear in the woods during winter. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for picking up the second installment of *Bibliophile Princess*. The whole reason I am able to bring you this book is because of all the people gracious enough to want to pick up my work in the first place and read it. I truly appreciate all of you.

I know it's a bit sudden, but I'd like to share some behind the scenes tidbits with you. For those who haven't read the whole book and have skipped to the end to read the afterword first, please be warned there will be spoilers. Proceed with caution.

This volume contains a compilation of three arcs, a triple feature that's serious in the first half and comedy in the latter half.

The first of these was originally entitled *The Flower Protector*. We took the web version of the story and edited it for print. In the process, we revised parts that might have been difficult to understand for less experienced readers, and as a result, the story here differs a bit from what I originally wrote for the web novel. I hope those of you who have already read the web version were still able to enjoy your second readthrough with the light novel.

The Flower Protector differs from the first volume of the series in that it's not about showing off the heroine's (Elianna's) power. It's about giving her the opportunity to come face-to-face with everything she'd said up until now without really considering the consequences of what she was saying. I wanted to show the reader the process of her ruminating, feeling uncertain, learning, and ultimately, settling into her own beliefs. I hope I was able to convey that well enough.

The insect you see appear during the story (ladybird) is the British term for the lady beetle (also known as coccinellidae). Though I would like you all to know the depiction of it in this story is completely fictional.

The second story is about the royal guards. This one was added for the light novel and was not originally part of the web novel series. Since *The Flower Protector* was such a serious story, I wanted to aim for something that could allow people to relax a bit more, and so of course, Glen had to be sacrificed (lol).

I know I'm the one who wrote it, but even I thought it was so utterly tragic I almost wanted to open up a donation box for him. Still, given his character, being pitiful (and wretched) just fit.

Well, actually, the extra story was supposed to originally feature the rival prince in a starring role, but alas, Glen's charisma exceeded his and stole the show in my head, so this must have been how he wanted things to turn out.

The third story is *The Desire to Cheat*. This was originally a complete short story that was part of the web novel version, but I decided to add to it since there were so many who asked for a continuation of it. Since the first time I wrote it with a happily-ever-after type of ending with no real way to continue on, I was drawing blanks with how to proceed. That's why it turned to comedy. Some "Fairy Princess" Eli turned out to be...whoops!

Well, at any rate, if there hadn't been requests for me to write a continuation, I don't think this story would have ever come to be. I would like to once again show my appreciation to all of you, both those who read the web novel series and those who picked this off the shelf. Thank you.

Our hero and heroine, much like their author, are still very inexperienced. I always wonder to myself if I've done an efficient job at wrapping up the stories within the series. When it comes time to write the next part, I'm always surprised to find I still have much more growing to do. This is a continuous, daily cycle that reminds me of just how inexperienced I am and how outstanding all of you are (as readers).

Every time I start to think, *Oh, I hope I'm able to grow at least a little bit along with my characters...* I have to stop and remind myself, *No, you WILL grow with them! You must! You've got this!*

To my editor: during the process of preparing this volume for publication, I caused you much inconvenience and grief. Thank you so very, very much for everything. I know it must have taken a lot of effort to motivate a slow writer like me. The only reason this volume saw the light of day was because you worked so hard to support me, adapting yourself to whatever I needed at the time.

Being an editor truly is a difficult job. If I was offered such a position, I think I would pass (Editor: Hey now...).

I would also like to thank the proofreaders, the designer, everyone at Ichijinsha (publishing company), and the Syosetsu website (where the web novel is uploaded). To everyone who participated in the completion of this book: thank you.

My appreciation also goes out to the illustrator, Satsuki Sheena, who continued her work from the first novel despite how busy she is. I can't even describe in words how amazing her illustrations are. They were so brilliant I almost felt like I was being blinded by them! (No joke, I was so captivated my eyes were literally sparkling as I looked at her art.) Thank you for your wonderful illustrations, as always.

But my readers are the ones I would like to thank the most for all of this. I'm grateful every day that I can be a writer whose words are read by so many people. Though I may lack experience still, I will continue to work hard through future publications of the series. Nothing would make me happier than if you were able to enjoy my story along the way! I pray we'll be able to see each other again.

-Yui



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Bibliophile Princess: Volume 2
by Yui

Translated by Alyssa Niioka
Edited by Suzanne Seals

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